Aviation Elite Units • 38

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53° Stormo

MARK POSTLETHWAITE '10

Marco Mattioli

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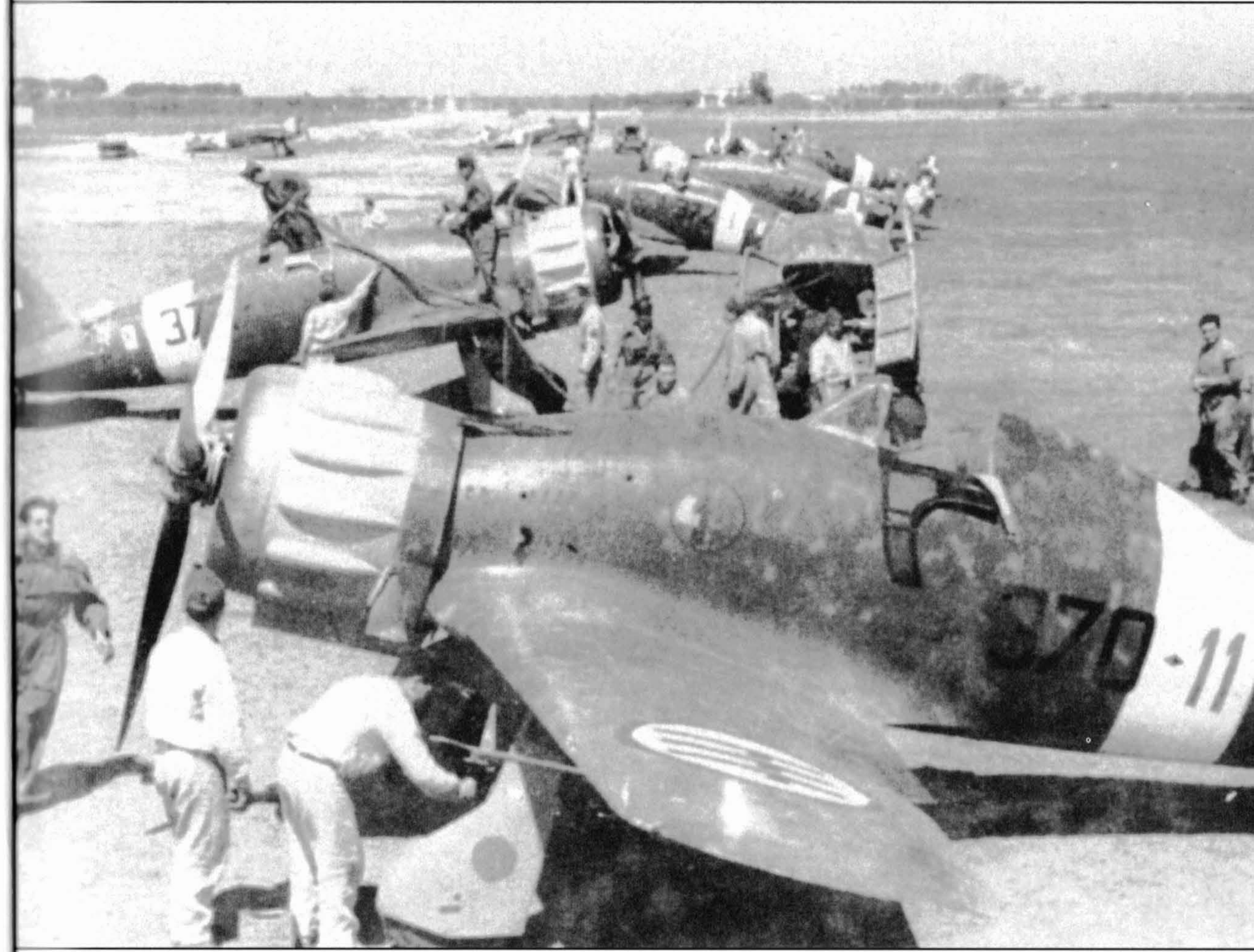

Marco Mattioli

Series editor Tony Holmes

Front Cover

On 12 August 1942 14 Macchi C.202 *Folgores* of 153° *Gruppo 'Asso di Bastoni'* ('Ace of Clubs'), led by the *gruppo* commander Maggiore Andrea Favini, set off at 1135 hrs from Decimomannu airfield in Sardinia. They were tasked with escorting Italian SM.84 bombers, SM.79 torpedo-bombers and CR.42 dive-bombers that were targeting the incoming Malta-bound *Pedestal* naval convoy. South of Sardinia the Macchis were heavily engaged in combat with carrier-based British fighters, Italian pilots claiming five Sea Hurricanes shot down and one probable for no loss.

Following the late morning combat on the 12th, 800 NAS reported the loss of Sea Hurricane V7659 flown by Sub Lt John Lucas (missing), while an 885 NAS Sea Hurricane flown by Lt Brian Paterson was badly damaged by fighters.

In this specially commissioned cover artwork by Mark Postlethwaite, Maggiore Favini flies past the Sea Hurricane of Sub Lt Lucas at the very moment the stricken fighter struck the Mediterranean Sea after being attacked by a C.202. This action was briefly described in Favini's flight book, although he reported noting a different tally for his unit – this was probably his own personal score;

'Escort to SM.84s and CR.42s over the convoy. Combat against ten Hurricanes. One aircraft shot down and four effectively fired on'.

At 1715 hrs that same day another escort mission was flown by 14 'Ace of Clubs' *Folgores* for Italian torpedo-bombers again targeting the convoy. Three days later, on 15 August, the C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* returned to their home at Turin-Caselle airfield in Piedmont (northern Italy) (*Cover artwork by Mark Postlethwaite*)

Dedication

To my father Fabrizio and my family. Dad, I will remember you forever.

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Osprey Publishing,
Midland House, West Way, Botley, Oxford OX2 0PH, UK
44-20 23rd St, Suite 219, Long Island City, NY 11101, USA

E-mail; info@ospreypublishing.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 1 84603 977 5
E-book ISBN: 978 1 84603 978 2

Edited by Tony Holmes
Page design by Mark Holt
Cover Artwork by Mark Postlethwaite
Aircraft Profiles by Richard Caruana
Index by Alan Thatcher
Originated by PDQ Digital Media Solutions, Suffolk, UK
Printed in China through Bookbuilders

10 11 12 13 14 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Osprey Publishing is supporting the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity by funding the dedication of trees.

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Acknowledgements

The author would thank the following individuals for their kind support in the preparation of this book – Maurizio Di Terlizzi, Gianni Panebianco, Nino Arena, Igino Coggi, Generale I Mouzis HAF, Manlio Palmieri and Mr Moruzzi. Many thanks also to the Tarantola family, Giorgio di Giorgio on behalf of CMPR (Ravenna, Italy), Riccardo Udiente and Mr Taliento. Thank you also to the personnel of the Italian Air Force Historical Service (AUSSMA), namely Tenente Colonello Massimiliano Barlattani, Marescialli Pasquale Rubertone, Antonio Palmieri, Ruggero Liberotti, Massimo Pasquali, Eleonora Pitaro and Alessandra Maturi. Finally, thanks again to the personnel of the Italian Central Archive of State (ACS), especially Annalisa Zanottini and Mrs Ecker.

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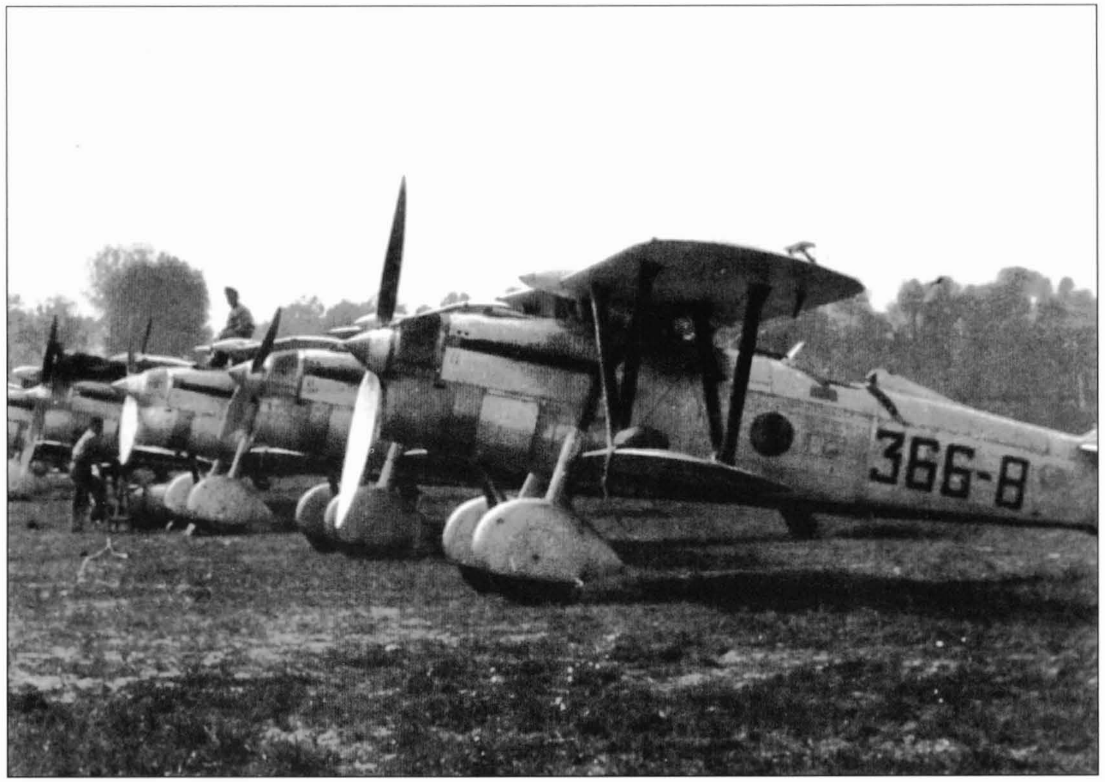
INTRODUCTION

The 53° *Stormo Caccia Terrestre* (land fighter wing) of the *Regia Aeronautica* was formed on 15 May 1936 at Mirafiori airfield near Turin, in Piedmont, northwest Italy. The new unit was comprised of 150° *Gruppo* (363ª and 364ª *Squadriglie*, and 365ª *Squadriglia* from 1 June) and 151° *Gruppo* (366ª and 367ª *Squadriglie*, and 368ª *Squadriglia* from 1 July). All these squadrons were equipped with Fiat CR.32 biplane fighters, although there were some examples of old Fiat CR.20, CR.30 and IMAM Ro.41 biplanes also on strength that were used for training. The unit's first CO was Colonello (group captain) Vincenzo Velardi.

The basic tactical unit of the *Regia Aeronautica* during this period and throughout World War 2 was the *squadriglia* (squadron), which normally comprised nine aircraft plus three more in reserve. Two or three *squadriglie* formed a *gruppo* (group) and two or more *gruppi* comprised a *stormo* (wing). The *stormo* represented the basic tactical formation, and its strength could reach 72 aircraft, although this figure was rarely if ever reached, especially in the later stages of the war. Often *gruppi* and *squadriglie* were given autonomous status and operated independently of specific *stormi*.



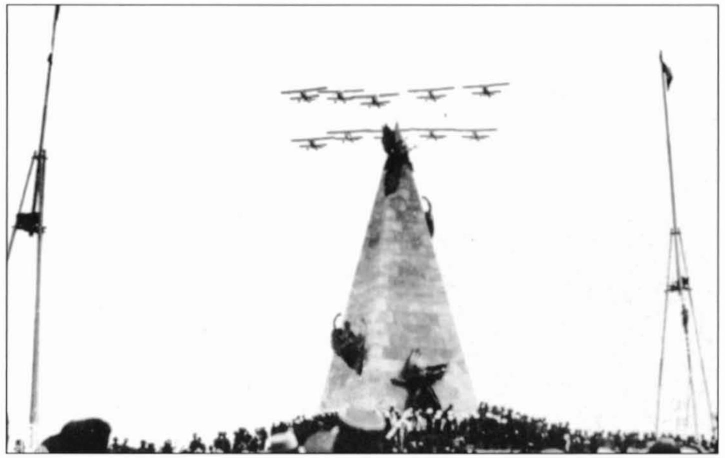
A line-up of CR.32s from 151° *Gruppo* at Turin-Mirafiori airfield in 1936. These nimble biplane fighters formed the equipment of 53° *Stormo* upon its formation in May of that year. Visible in the foreground is CR.32 366-8 of 366ª *Squadriglia*, which was commanded between May and December 1936 by Capitano Armando Francois *(Aeronautica Militare)*

Tasked with the air defence of northwestern Italy, 53° *Stormo* established an aerobatic team in 1937. Called the *Pattuglia Mirafiori* (Mirafiori Patrol), the team comprised six aircraft led by Capitano (flight lieutenant) Oscar Molinari. Between August 1937 and February 1938, the team, together with another from 1° *Stormo*, toured South America to honour the Peruvian flyer Geo Chavez, who had crashed fatally near Domodossola, in northern Italy, after he had flown over the Alps on 23 September 1910.

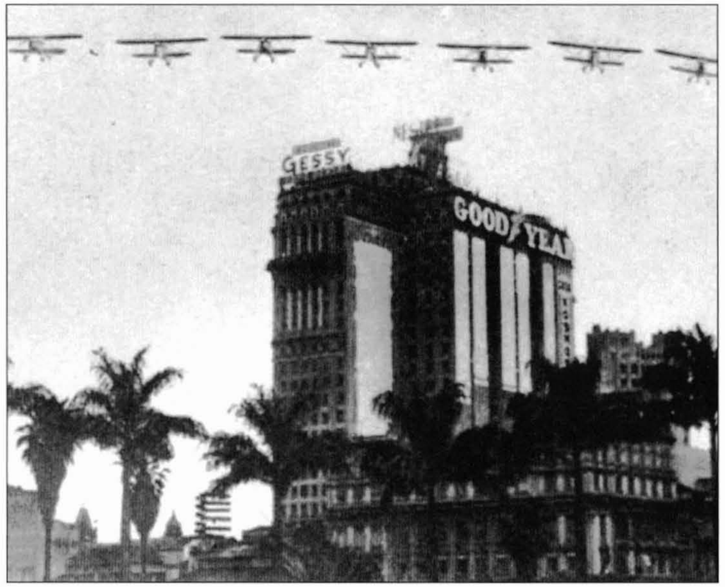
CR.32s of the *Regia Aeronautica* aerobatic teams from 1° and 53° *Stormi* performed at airshows in Latin America between August 1937 and February 1938 (*AM*)

These pilots from the touring Italian aerobatic teams are obviously happy with their performance at yet another Latin American airshow (*AM*)

During the tour the team performed in Lima, Santiago, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro and San Paolo. The Italian pilots



At 1445 hrs on 23 September 1937, the CR.32s of the Italian aerobatic teams inaugurated a monument to Peruvian flyer Geo Chavez in Lima, Peru, with a flypast. Watched by enthusiastic spectators, the Fiats appeared overhead in a 'double-wedge' formation made up of two patrols of five aircraft, with that from 53° *Stormo* bringing up the rear (*AM*)



In line-abreast formation, the Italian pilots overfly a South American city. They were warmly received during their tour of Latin American countries thanks to their remarkable aerobatic skill (*AM*)

proved their skills by performing aerobatics during 11 airshows, and also by flying in formation at 25,700 ft over the Andes. Ten CR.32s took off on this historic flight from Santiago at 2200 hrs on 8 November 1937, taking 30 minutes to overfly the mountains before eventually landing at the El Plumerillo airfield at Mendoza, in Argentina, at 0330 hrs. The flight was lauded in the Latin American press, and the Italian pilots subsequently performed to large audiences for the remainder of their tour. This event greatly boosted Italian prestige in Latin America, and helped introduce the Italian aviation industry to local markets.

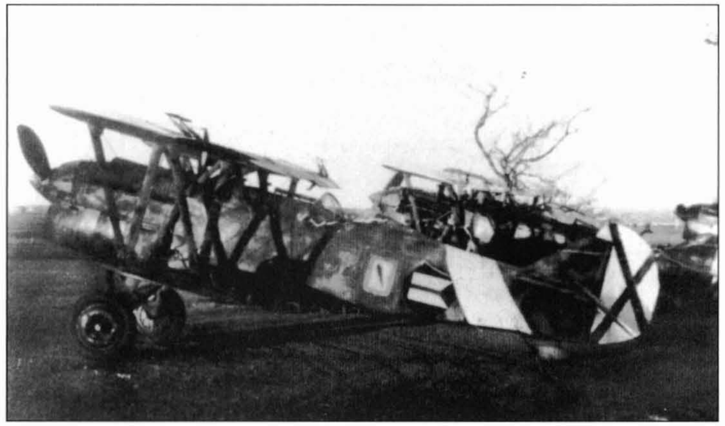
Between June 1937 and February 1938, 53° *Stormo's* units moved from Mirafiori to Turin-Caselle. The first to arrive, on 20 June, was 151° *Gruppo*. It was joined on 15 October by *stormo* staff and, in February, by 150° *Gruppo*. The *stormo's* six *squadriglie* began an intensive training programme, the results of which were considered so good that, in March 1939, 53° *Stormo* became the first *Regia Aeronautica* fighter unit to be equipped with the Fiat CR.42 *Falco* – aircraft were initially issued to 367ª *Squadriglia*. The *stormo's* aerobatic team, led by Capitano Simeone Marsan, quickly re-equipped with five CR.42s and performed at an airshow held at Caselle in May 1939. In doing so it became the only aerobatic team to fly the CR.42, and the last to represent the *Regia Aeronautica* before the outbreak of World War 2.

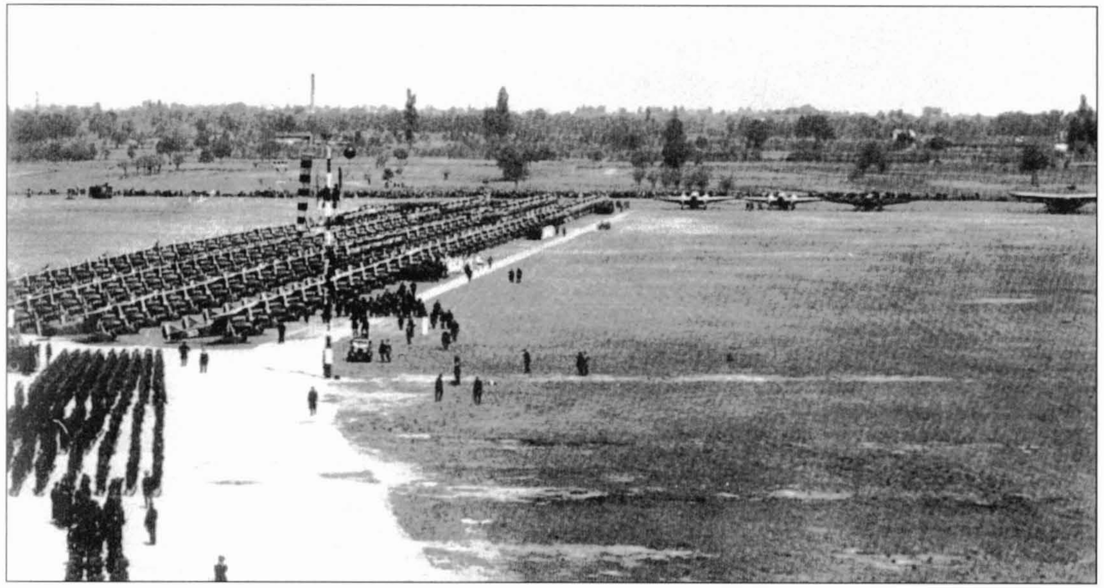
Between 1937 and 1939, the *stormo*, initially under the command of Tenente Colonello Giuseppe Borri and then Colonello Alberto Canaveri, performed at many airshows, and also participated in military exercises with the Royal Italian Army.

In April 1939 the *stormo* supported the Italian invasion of Albania when six of its Caproni Ca.133 transport aircraft ferried troops and equipment across the Adriatic from Apulian airfields. In little more than a year's time, Italy would find itself engulfed in a wider and far more destructive conflict that would see 53° *Stormo's* fighter units put to the test.

Bottom left
This line-up of CR.32s from XXIII *Gruppo Caccia* is pictured during the Spanish Civil War. The aircraft in the foreground displays a blue red-striped *gruppo* commander's pennant aft of the unit badge. During the war the unit was led by ace Maggiore Andrea Zotti and then by Maggiore Aldo Remondino (*AM*)

Below
Among the seven pilots of XXIII *Gruppo Caccia* to be posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour during the Spanish Civil War, only Tenente Gilberto Caselli came from the ranks of 53° *Stormo*. Shot down and wounded in combat over Villamayor on 26 August 1937, Caselli was captured but died of his wounds in hospital. All fighter *stormi* within the *Regia Aeronautica* volunteered pilots for the war in Spain (*AM*)





53° *Stormo* personnel and their CR.32s line up for an official ceremony at Turin–Caselle airfield in 1937 (*AM*)

A young unnamed airman poses for the camera with a 367ª *Squadriglia* CR.32 (151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*) at Turin-Mirafiori airfield in 1936. This aircraft's *matricola militare* (MM2614) identifies it as being from the first production batch of 50 CR.32s built between March and August 1934 (*AM*)

367-
FIAT CR
2614

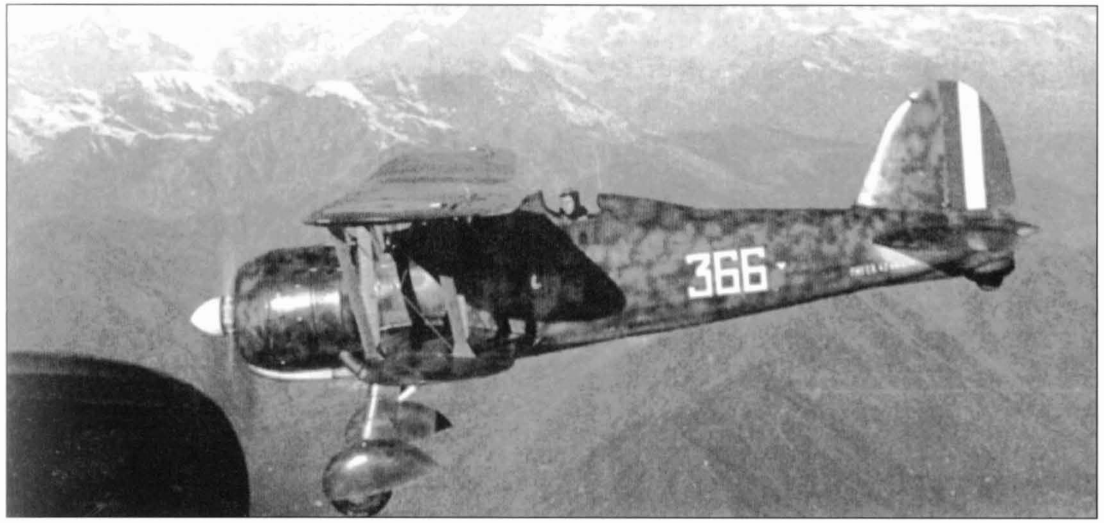
FRANCE AND THE BALKANS

When Italy declared war on the western Allies in June 1940, the sub-units of 53° *Stormo* were deployed at northern Italian airfields, while *stormo* staff and 150° *Gruppo* were at Turin-Caselle and 151° *Gruppo* at Casabianca.

The war against France was brief but fierce. On 13 June 18 CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo's* three *squadriglie*, led by Maggiore Carlo Calosso and escorted by nine others from 150° *Gruppo*, took off from Ligurian Albenga airfield to attack Hyères air base near Toulon. There, they destroyed 15 French aircraft on the ground. Sergente Maggiore Dino Carta of 366ª *Squadriglia* (151° *Gruppo*) shot down a Vought V-156F dive-bomber of *Aéronavale Escadrille* AB 3, coded AB 3-6 and crewed by Second-Maître Droucpeet and Quartier-Maître Lucas. The French aircraft, which had been approaching its base to land, crashed into the sea off Hyères, killing both crewmen. This represented the first Italian kill on the northwestern front. Despite intense anti-aircraft fire, all the CR.42s returned to their base, with only the fighter of Sergente Maggiore Giulio Cesare of 366ª *Squadriglia* being slightly damaged.

On 15 June it was the turn of 150° *Gruppo* to see action when its crews attacked the French airfield of Cuers-Pierrefeu, home to the *Aéronavale's Escadrilles* AC 3 (with 11 Bloch MB.151 fighters) and AB 3 (with 11 V-156Fs). Twenty-seven CR.42s took off from Albenga airfield and headed for Cuers, where they destroyed six V-156Fs of AB 3. *Gruppo* CO Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli led 12 pilots, including 365ª *Squadriglia* CO, Capitano Giorgio Graffer. The attackers were covered by 15 more CR.42s led by *stormo* CO Colonello Arrigo Tessari, with eight 363ª *Squadriglia* fighters, led by Capitano Luigi Mariotti, providing top cover and seven from 364ª *Squadriglia* flying at a lower altitude.

151° *Gruppo* armourers prepare ammunition belts at Casabianca airfield in June 1940. The unit was deployed here on 3 June, just before Italy entered World War 2 (*AM*)



A CR.42 of 151° *Gruppo's* 366ª *Squadriglia* flies over the Alps. As the Italian tri-colour flag displayed on the rudders of *Regia Aeronautica* aircraft was officially replaced by the white cross of Savoy following the issuing of an order on 12 June 1940, this photograph must have been taken just before the war, or soon after the start of hostilities (*AM*)

Another prominent ace to serve with 150° *Gruppo* was Maresciallo Guido Fibbia, who was credited with six kills in World War 2 to add to his three victories in Spain. Fibbia served with 365ª and 95ª *Squadriglie* of the *Regia Aeronautica* and ended the war with 2ª *Squadriglia* of 1° *Gruppo* ANR in 1944-45. As a sergente maggiore, he took part in the strafing attack on the French airfield of Cuers on 15 June 1940, earning him the War Cross for Military Valour (*Ala Tricolore*)

The Italian raiders were intercepted by two sections each of three MB.151 fighters from *Escadrille* AC 3 that had taken off from Cuers. Tessari's seven 364ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s pounced on them with devastating results. All three Blochs in the first section were hit, formation leader Lt de Vaisseau Ziegler (AC 3's CO, flying aircraft coded 3-1 no 77) being wounded and forced to crash-land back at his airfield. MB.151 3-3 no 69, flown by Second-Maître Miramont, and 3-2 (Second-Maître Briet) were both seriously damaged, but Miramont shot down CR.42 MM5579 in return, killing pilot Capitano Nino Caselli of 364ª *Squadriglia*. The second section of French fighters fared worse, with all three machines being downed by the CR.42s. The section leader, Adjutant-Chef André Hourcade, flying MB.151 3-15 no 51, was killed and his squadronmates in 3-8 no 348 (pilot Soulimont) and 3-9 no 37 (Second-Maître Marcel Le Bihan) crash-landed. Le Bihan's aircraft burst into flames when it came down at Rocbaron and he later died of his wounds.

In this fierce combat the Italians had shot down four MB.151s for the loss of two CR.42s, although only one of the latter machines had actually been shot down. MM5590 of 364ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Tenente Giuseppe Enrico Zuffi, force-landed on the runway at Cuers due to a mechanical failure and the pilot was captured. The undamaged fighter was the only Italian aircraft captured by the *Aéronautique Navale* in June 1940, and it was later repainted in French colours and put on display as a war prize. After the end of Franco-Italian hostilities the Italians pressed the Vichy authorities for the return of the fighter, which was handed over in August 1940. Following the French surrender Zuffi was released, and on 5 August 1940 he was posted to 368ª *Squadriglia* of 151° *Gruppo*.

During the attack on Cuers, the 365ª *Squadriglia* aircraft of Capitano Graffer and Sottotenente Lorenzo Clerici were damaged by French fighters. Graffer later received the Bronze Medal for Military Valour following this mission, while the War Cross for Military Valour went to his seven wingmen, among whom were Clerici and future six-kill ace Sergente Maggiore Guido Fibbia.

CR.42s prepare to take off from an Italian airstrip near the French border during the short conflict with France in June 1940. 53° *Stormo* fighter pilots would distinguish themselves throughout this short but sharp operational tour (*AM*)

Aside from combat losses in the Franco-Italian war, which ended on 25 June 1940, 53° *Stormo* had also had three fighters from 151° *Gruppo* written off in flying accidents. On 17 June Maresciallo Giulio Bernardi of 366ª *Squadriglia* was killed in MM5589, and 368ª *Squadriglia* lost MM4295, with Sergente Luigi Papa killed, four days later. Finally, Sergente Piero Hosquet bailed out of MM4331. For this short but hard operational tour, 53° *Stormo* earned its first Silver Medal for Military Valour.

In the following months the *stormo*, operating mainly from Caselle and Novi Ligure airfields, was tasked with patrolling the skies of Piedmont and Liguria. Its pilots encountered several enemy aircraft during this period, with the first successful night interception taking place on 13/14 August when Capitano Graffer intercepted RAF Whitley V P4965/ZA-H of No 10 Sqn over Turin.

Accurate return fire from the bomber's tail gunner hit the biplane, forcing its pilot to attack from below. With his CR.42 badly damaged and its guns jammed, the slightly wounded Graffer was unable to return to base. He therefore decided to ram the Whitley, and in doing so he severely damaged the bomber's starboard aileron. Graffer then bailed out and later received the Silver Medal for Military Valour for this bold action. The Whitley fared less well. With one engine out of action, the crippled bomber was able to limp across France, only to crash into the sea off the Kent coast. The two pilots, Plt Off E I Parsons and Sgt A N Campion, were killed but the remaining three crewmen, Sgts Chamberlain, Marshall and Sharpe, escaped. This was the war's first confirmed night success for an Italian pilot.

Other night actions followed. On 18/19 August CR.42 MM5580, flown by Tenente Giuseppe Zuffi of 368ª *Squadriglia*, set off from Bresso. Intercepting a marauding bomber that was thought to have been another Whitley V near Milan, he fired a long burst at it but was wounded by return fire and forced to disengage. On 25/26 August two 368ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s flown by Tenente Zuffi and Sottotenente Furio Lauri were scrambled from Bresso and Cameri to intercept British bombers attacking Milan and Gallarate. In the ensuing actions both pilots fired at a Whitley V, Lauri earning a War Cross for Military Valour.

GREECE AND THE BALKANS

After briefly transitioning to new Macchi C.200 monoplane fighters, which were then handed over to the Caselle air depot, much to the disappointment of those that had flown them, 150° *Gruppo* was ordered to Albania on the eve of the Italian attack on Greece on 28 October 1940. With an establishment of 37 CR.42s and 44 pilots, the *gruppo*, comprising 363ª, 364ª and 365ª *Squadriglie*, and led by Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli, reached Albania on 1 November. Once in Albania the *gruppo* would fly almost daily in support of Italian ground units and engage in fierce combat with Greek and British opponents.

Initially, 364ª and 365ª *Squadriglie* flew from Valona and Argyrokastron airfields, while 363ª *Squadriglia* was transferred to 160° *Gruppo Autonomo*, operating from Tirana airport from 24 October. On 2 November, 363ª *Squadriglia* was deployed to Drenova airstrip, but by the 12th the unit had been forced back to Koritza by a Greek offensive. It returned to Tirana on the 21st. When not moving airfields, the unit's CR.42s were embroiled in aerial combats. For example, on 2 November Capitano Luigi Mariotti was leading 12 Fiats charged with escorting Cant Z.1007bis bombers to Salonika when they engaged eight PZL P.24s. Four of the Greek fighters were claimed to have been shot

Tenente Furio Lauri was among the most distinguished of 53° *Stormo's* fighter pilots, serving with 151° *Gruppo's* 368ª *Squadriglia*. Between June 1940 and December 1941 he earned a War Cross for Military Valour and twice received the Silver Medal for Military Valour for operations over Italy, the Mediterranean and North Africa. Later, Lauri flew ground attack missions in G.50bis fighter-bombers and was downed and wounded by US anti-aircraft fire on 22 January 1943. After the Italian armistice he chose to fight alongside the Allies, flying hazardous missions in a Fieseler Fi 156 *Storch* rescuing Allied pilots downed in German-held territory. For his courage Lauri became the only former 53° *Stormo* pilot to receive the Gold Medal for Military Valour while still alive. Lauri claimed a total of 11 kills during the war, although this is not confirmed by official documents. However, 368ª *Squadriglia* war diaries credit him with two individual and one shared kills achieved in three aerial combats in North Africa. After the war he became a successful businessman in the aviation industry and passed away in 2002 (*AM*)

Displayed in the Italian Air Force Museum at Vigna di Valle, Rome, Storch Fi 156C-3 MM12822 is the aircraft in which Tenente Furio Lauri flew missions behind enemy lines in 1944-45 to retrieve downed Allied airmen (*Gianni Panebianco*)

Between 17 and 19 September 1940, 150° *Gruppo* unexpectedly but temporarily received 37 C.200s much to the delight of the pilots. Within days of completing their transition onto the new monoplanes the pilots had to hand them over to the Turin-Caselle air depot (*AM*)

down, with two CR.42s damaged. The Greeks admitted that one PZL of 22 *Mira* had indeed been hit and forced to land, Capt John Kyriazes being wounded.

That same day five CR.42s of Capitano Giorgio Graffer's 365ª *Squadriglia* engaged three PZLs of 21 *Mira* over Yanina, Graffer himself sharing three kills with Sottotenente Lorenzo Clerici and Sergenti Bruno Zotti and Pietro Secchi. The Greek unit recorded the loss of two PZLs and their pilots, 1Lt John Sakellariou and Cpl Christos Papadopulos.

Another opportunity for 365ª *Squadriglia* to increase its score came on 4 November when two CR.42s flown by Clerici and Sergente Pasquale Facchini intercepted three elderly Breguet XIXs of 2 *Mira* that were strafing Alpini mountain troops near Smolika. Fire from the Italian biplanes hit two of the Breguets and one of them crashed in flames, killing Maj Fridericos Katassos, CO of 2 *Mira*, and his observer 2Lt Alexandros Sarvanis. The other Breguet force-landed at Xyrolimni with a wounded observer, while the third one escaped.

On 6 November 364ª *Squadriglia* encountered RAF aircraft for the first time when three CR.42s led by Capitano Nicola Magaldi scrambled to intercept three Blenheim Is of No 30 Sqn, led by Sqn Ldr Shannon, that were attacking Valona airfield. The Italian fighters pressed home their attacks, badly damaging all the British bombers. Indeed, Sgt John Merifield, gunner in Sgt G W Ratlidge's aircraft, was killed by fire from Capitano Magaldi. The Italian pilot reported downing the bomber, but all three crippled Blenheim Is managed to make it back to their base at Eleusis.

The next day, six Wellington ICs of No 70 Sqn sent to strike at Valona once again were intercepted by five CR.42s from 150° and two from 154° *Gruppi*. The fighters shot down T2731, flown by Flt Lt A E Brian, killing four crewmen and sending two more into captivity. They also accounted for Sgt G N Brooks' T2734, all six crew being killed. Two other Wellingtons were damaged. Tenenti Alberto Spigaglia and Alberto Triolo and Maresciallo Guglielmo Bacci of 364ª *Squadriglia* were the successful pilots from 150° *Gruppo*, sharing two bombers and another probable between them.

On 9 November 363ª *Squadriglia* lost its first CR.42 in action when Sottotenente Pietro Janniello was shot down and killed by anti-aircraft fire while strafing Greek troops near Vistrica's upper basin. Four days later the Blenheim Is of No 84 Sqn's 'A' Flight bombed Argyrokastron airfield shortly after dawn, destroying a IMAM Ro.37 reconnaissance aircraft and a Ca.133 transport and damaging a CR.42. 363ª *Squadriglia* duly scrambled Sottotenente Ernesto Trevisi and Sergente Mario Scagliarini, and they managed to damage one of the raiders.

14 November saw the Royal Hellenic Air Force attack Koritza airfield in support of a major Greek ground offensive. This raid led to one of the greatest aerial battles of the Greek campaign when nine PZL fighters of 23 *Mira*, led by unit CO Episminagos (major) Gregorios Theodoropoulos, were intercepted by two 363ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s flown by Sottotenenti Enea Atti and Maurizio di Robilant. The P.24s evaded the two Fiats, which then turned their attention to two Blenheim Is of 32 *Mira* that were targeting Koritza. They claimed one probable victory.

Meanwhile, other CR.42s of 363ª *Squadriglia* and 160° *Gruppo* had arrived to engage the Greek aircraft. A Battle light bomber of 33 *Mira* was severely damaged by the CR.42s of Sottotenente Ugo Drago and Maresciallo Giuseppe Salvadori of 363ª *Squadriglia*, the Italian pilots claiming it as a probable. The CR.42s then clashed twice with the nine PZLs of 23 *Mira*, six of which were credited to the Fiat pilots as destroyed. In the first engagement, Drago shared one kill with Sergente Maggiore Teofilo Biolcati while Sottotenente Romeo Della Costanza claimed a second victory with Sergente Maggiore Bruno Benassi. The second dogfight saw Drago share the destruction of four PZLs with Salvadori and Sergente Mario Scagliarini. In reality, no 23 *Mira* pilots

A 364ª *Squadriglia* pilot at readiness with his CR.42 at Valona airfield, Albania, in late 1940 when the unit operated separately from 150° *Gruppo*. It re-joined on 20 November (*AM*)

Sottotenente Ernesto 'Tino' Trevisi, a fighter pilot with 150° *Gruppo's* 363ª *Squadriglia*, was shot down and killed in combat with Greek P.24 fighters of 23 *Mira* on 14 November 1940 over Koritza. At the time he was flying as wingman to 150° *Gruppo* ace Sottotenente Ugo Drago. Trevisi was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour (*AM*)

Capitano Nicola Magaldi, CO of 150° *Gruppo's* 364ª *Squadriglia*, was killed during an engagement with RAF Gladiators of No 80 Sqn north of Yanina on 27 November 1940. He was another of 150° *Gruppo's squadriglia* commanders to be posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour following his death at the age of 29 (*AM*)

were listed as killed or wounded following these combats, although the Greeks did admit that four PZLs had been damaged.

However, the unit's fighters shot down two CR.42s in return, Sottotenente Ernesto Trevisi (who was awarded a posthumous Gold Medal for Military Valour) perishing in MM6251 and Sergente Augusto Manetti bailing out of MM5578 behind Italian lines. Finally, Sergente Maggiore Vittorio Pirchio was wounded in the left foot when his CR.42 MM5035 was badly shot-up – the crippled aircraft nosed over on landing.

The next day, aristocratic Sottotente Maurizio di Robilant of 363ª *Squadriglia*, serving with 150° *Gruppo*, was escorting a reconnaissance Ro.37 of 72° *Gruppo OA* (*Osservazione Aerea*) when he engaged four Battles of 33 *Mira* that had just bombed Koritza South airfield. A few hours earlier the same unit had attacked Koritza North, destroying a Ca.133 and four fighters on the ground. Keen to seek revenge for the raid, di Robilant shot down B272, flown by Episminias (flight sergeant) Frangoulis Arnidis, and B276, piloted by Anthyposminagos (second lieutenant) Kondides. The aircraft crashed in nearby mountains, with both pilots and one observer being killed. Di Robilant also seriously damaged Battle B274, piloted by Sminagos (captain) Demetrius Pitsikas. The aircraft struggled back to base, however, where Pitsikas' observer, Anthyposminagos Aristofanes Papas, later succumbed to his wounds.

Although Pitsikas had escaped unhurt, he was destined not to survive the war. On 11 March 1941 he was flying as observer in the Battle piloted by Antisminarchos (lieutenant colonel) Demetrius Stathakis, CO of 33 *Mira*, when it was shot down by Italian fighters between Nivitsa and Slatinia. Both men were killed.

On 18 November Sergente Maggiore Teofilo Biolcati of 363ª *Squadriglia*, flying with 160° *Gruppo*, shared in the destruction of a P.24 with a 393ª *Squadriglia* pilot. It was one of three Greek PZL fighters shot down by CR.42s that day, two of which were from 22 *Mira* and the other from 23 *Mira*. The 19th saw 363ª *Squadriglia* encounter the RAF in Greece for the first time when nine Gladiator IIs of No 80 Sqn's 'B' Flight downed a Fiat G.50 *Freccia* from 24° *Gruppo* and three CR.42s of 160° *Gruppo*. Two of the latter were flown by 363ª *Squadriglia* pilots, with Sergente Maggiore Natale Viola and Maresciallo Giuseppe Salvadori both being killed. Sottotenente Drago's CR.42 was also hit, although he managed to make it home.

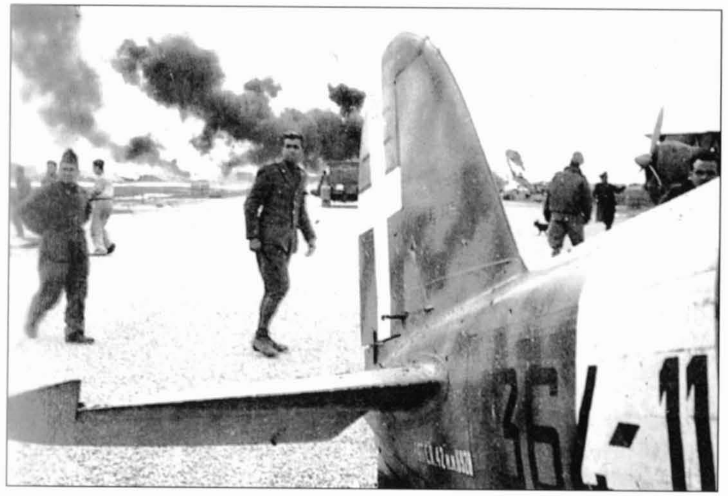
Ten 363ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s, led by Capitano Luigi Mariotti, joined fighters from 160° *Gruppo* in a strafing attack on Kozani airfield on 27 November. Pilots claimed to have destroyed five Breguet XIXs from 2 *Mira* and damaged three more. In fact, this attack deprived the Greek unit of all of its Breguets, and pilot Anthyposminagos Panayiotis Maroulakos, was killed. Other personnel were injured. That same day, six CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo*, led by Capitano Nicola Magaldi, CO of 364ª *Squadriglia*, were intercepted north of Yanina by nine Gladiator IIs of No 80 Sqn led by Sqn Ldr W J Hickey. In the fierce swirling dogfight that ensued, Magaldi was killed and Sergente Giovanni Negri wounded. Negri made it back to base with his badly shot-up CR.42, while Magaldi was awarded a posthumous Gold Medal for Military Valour.

Another blow was suffered by 150° *Gruppo* the next day when six Gladiator IIs of No 80 Sqn's 'A' Flight, led by Flt Lt E G 'Tap' Jones, engaged five CR.42s of 364ª *Squadriglia* and five from 365ª *Squadriglia* over Delvinakion. A Fiat from 364ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Sergente Corrado Mignani, collided with Gladiator II N5812 of Flg Off H U Sykes and both pilots were killed. In the whirling combat, Flt Lt Jones in N5816 claimed to have shot down two CR.42s before a hail of bullets shattered his instrument panel. Despite a neck wound, Jones flew his crippled Gladiator II back to its base at Trikkala, escorted by Sgt Don S Gregory in Gladiator II N5776. Another three RAF fighters were badly damaged, namely N5854 (Flg Off H D Wanklyn Flower), N5788 (Flg Off W B Price-Owen) and N5786 (Flg Off F W Hosken).

Apart from Mignani's CR.42, 150° *Gruppo* had lost the aircraft flown by Sergente Achille Pacini of 364ª *Squadriglia* after he bailed out, and the machine of five-kill ace, and 365ª *Squadriglia* CO, Capitano Giorgio Graffer, who lost his life. The latter was posthumously awarded Italy's highest award, the Gold Medal for Military Valour. Two more Fiat fighters were damaged and their pilots, Maresciallo Guglielmo Bacci of 364ª *Squadriglia* and Sergente Bruno Zotti of 365ª *Squadriglia*, wounded. The Italians claimed to have accounted for four Gladiators, but 150° *Gruppo* had lost two *squadriglie* commanders in as many days. On a more positive note, the 28th also saw CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo* claim a Blenheim I as a probable over Koritza while returning from escorting SM.79 bombers. No 84 Sqn lost L1385 on this date, with Plt Off D R Bird and his crew being captured, although the aircraft was probably downed by G.50s from 24° *Gruppo*.

On 2 December ten CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo* (six from 365ª and four from 364ª *Squadriglie*) intercepted nine Blenheim Is of No 211 Sqn that had just bombed Valona airfield. The RAF aircraft suffered little damage, although Sqn Ldr Gordon-Finlayson reported losing the aerial from his Blenheim and that a bullet had passed through Flt Lt George B Doudney's flying helmet! The next day 18 CR.42s of 363ª *Squadriglia* and 160° *Gruppo* engaged six PZLs of 23 *Mira* southwest of Moschopoles. The Greeks lost Anthyposminagos Constantine Tsitsas, who was killed.

Capitano Giorgio Graffer, CO of 150° *Gruppo's* 365ª *Squadriglia*, was a five-victory ace who was killed in combat with No 80 Sqn Gladiators over Albania on 28 November 1940. A remarkable pilot, he was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour at the age of 28. Graffer achieved 53° *Stormo's* first confirmed night kill when he rammed a Whitley V bomber of No 10 Sqn over Turin during the night of 13/14 August 1940. Although wounded in the process, Graffer managed to bail out safely and was later awarded the Silver Medal for Military Valour (*AM*)



This is Valona airfield after RAF Blenheims had visited 150° *Gruppo* during the winter of 1940-41. Clearly visible is the tail unit of CR.42 MM6928, coded 364-11, of 364ª *Squadriglia* which seems to have escaped destruction (*AM*)

Ten 363ª *Squadriglia* pilots led by Capitano Mariotti claimed to have downed two PZLs jointly with 393ª *Squadriglia*.

Fifteen CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo*, led by Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli, joined ten 154° *Gruppo* G.50s in a battle over Tepeleni on the 4th. Their opponents were 14 Gladiator IIs from Nos 80 and 112 Sqns, led by Sqn Ldr Hickey. Two CR.42s were shot down, Tenente Alberto Triolo and Sottotenente Carlo Penna both of 364ª *Squadriglia*, being killed. A further five Fiats were damaged, although they all made it back to Valona.

The following day 364ª *Squadriglia* attempted unsuccessfully to intercept three Blenheim Is of No 30 Sqn near Sarande. 150° *Gruppo* had better luck on 7 December when five CR.42s of 365ª *Squadriglia* engaged three Blenheim Is of No 84 Sqn over Valona. Two of the bombers, L8455 flown by Flt Lt L P Cattell and L8457 flown by Sgt M P Cazalet, were immediately shot down. Of the two crews, only Cazelet's gunner, Sgt C R Foster, survived and was captured. The third Blenheim I, L1381/A flown by Flg Off Ken Linton, was hit by a single burst fired by a CR.42 and written off after crash-landing south of Sarande. The Fiat fighters then turned their attention to three Blenheim Is of No 211 Sqn led by Flt Lt G D Jones, but they escaped after dropping their bombs on the target.

The British bombers continued to pay a heavy price for their attacks on Valona. On 18 December, six 150° *Gruppo* CR.42s (one of which was flown by future ace Sottotenente Ugo Drago) intercepted three Blenheim Is of No 30 Sqn that had taken off at 1000 hrs from Eleusis. The port engine of L8462 was hit and set on fire as the aircraft flew over Valona's harbour, the aircraft crashing into the sea west of Sarande. Flg Off S Paget and Sgts G Sigsworth and W Tubberby were both killed.

Early the following morning, in a change of tactic, the enemy threat to 150° *Gruppo* came not from the sky but from the sea when at 0120 hrs Valona was shelled by the Royal Navy battleships HMS *Warspite* and *Valiant*. Their heavy fire succeeded in damaging no fewer than 13 CR.42s.

Two days later, on 23 December, six CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo* and 15 others from 160° *Gruppo* engaged ten Gladiator IIs of No 80 Sqn led by Sqn Ldr Hickey. Although 160° *Gruppo* lost two CR.42s and their pilots, and had a third machine written off in a crash-landing, Hickey and Flg Off A D Ripley were both killed and Sgt D S Gregory and Flg Off Sidney Linnard wounded. Two pilots from 150° *Gruppo's* 364ª *Squadriglia* scored in this fierce dogfight, Capitano Luigi Corsini downing one Gladiator and claiming a second as a probable, and Sergente Maggiore Virgilio Pongiluppi destroying a second biplane fighter.

On Christmas Eve five No 211 Sqn Blenheim Is bombed Valona airfield, destroying two 150° *Gruppo* CR.42s and damaging a third. Three 363ª *Squadriglia* machines flown by Sottotenente Della Costanza and Sergenti Enrico Micheli and Scagliarini were scrambled and duly caught the raiders. Costanza claimed one probable while Micheli fired at another. The action resumed on Boxing Day when six 364ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s led by Capitano Luigi Corsini intercepted eight No 211 Sqn Blenheim Is that were bombing the Himarë–Valona road. The Fiats badly damaged L1482, flown by Plt Off R V Herbert and crewed by Sgts J B Dunnet and Hughes. It crash-landed at Menidi and was damaged beyond repair.

The year's final action for 150° *Gruppo* came on the 31st when two CR.42s of 363ª *Squadriglia* (flown by Sottotenente Maurizio di Robilant and Sergente Enrico Micheli) and one 154° *Gruppo* G.50 (flown by Sottotenente Giuliano Fissore) intercepted nine No 211 Sqn Blenheim Is south of Valona. They jointly shot down Sgt S L Bennett's L1540, sending it crashing into the sea and killing its crew.

NEW YEAR

After a short lull, the first action of 1941 took place on 6 January when two CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo's* 364ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Sergente Osvaldo Bartolaccini and Sottotenente Pasquale Faltoni joined 154° *Gruppo* G.50s in an attack on nine Blenheim Is from No 211 Sqn that had again bombed Valona harbour. Tenente Livio Bassi of 154° *Gruppo* shot down Blenheim L1487, its crew of Flg Off R D Campbell and Sgts J H Beharrell and R Appleyard being captured. Sergente Bartolaccini hit another, probably L8536, which later crash-landed, killing Flg Off L S Delaney and Sgts V Pollard and T A McCord. Four more Blenheim Is were damaged, with Flt Lt Doudney crash-landing short of Menidi airfield.

Six days later 12 CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo*, escorting reconnaissance Ro.37s near Topajani, dived down to strafe troops of the Greek 15th Infantry Division. Ground fire took its toll, however, with the Fiat of Tenente Franco Gatti (of 365ª *Squadriglia*) being killed.

On the 20th five more Blenheim Is from the hardworking No 211 Sqn again appeared over Valona, where they were set upon by four CR.42s from 150° *Gruppo*. Two of the bombers returned to base slightly damaged, and it was one of these that Sottotenente Ernani Loddo of 365ª *Squadriglia* claimed to have shot down.

The next large scale aerial engagement to involve 150° *Stormo* took place on 9 February when 17 CR.42s led by Capitano Edoardo Travaglini (of 365ª *Squadriglia*) engaged 11 Gladiator Is of No 80 Sqn led by ranking RAF ace Flt Lt 'Pat' Pattle. In the ensuing dogfight Sottotenente Romano Maionica (also of 365ª *Squadriglia*) and Sergente Danilo Birolo (of 364ª *Squadriglia*) were shot down, the latter landing in Yugoslav territory, while the fighter of Tenente Enzo Rovetta (of 364ª *Squadriglia*) sustained engine damage and crash-landed, seriously injuring the pilot. To complete the Italian losses, the CR.42 of formation leader Capitano Travaglini also suffered engine damage and force-landed.

In return, 150° *Gruppo* claimed to have shot down four Gladiators. 364ª *Squadriglia* pilots Tenente Spigaglia, Sottotenente Faltoni and Maresciallo Guidi were each credited with a kill. On the British side, No 80 Sqn lost Flg Off F W Hosken, who bailed out of Gladiator II N5811 with a leg wound, and Flt Lt G W V Kettlewell force-landed his otherwise undamaged N5858 with no oil pressure north of Yanina.

Two days later 17 CR.42s of 150° *Gruppo*, led by Capitano Luigi Mariotti, set off at 0720 hrs to strafe Yanina's Katzika airfield. A Greek

Gladiator of 21 *Mira* was promptly shot down by Capitano Mariotti as it attempted to take off, while 364ª *Squadriglia* pilots slightly damaged three more biplane fighters on the ground. Three CR.42s of 363ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Capitano Mariotti, Sottotenente Drago and Sergente Maggiore Benassi, made further strafing attacks, damaging another Gladiator. The three Fiat pilots then set fire to a lorry and damaged four others at Yanina. They also attacked a sailing ship spotted off Corfu.

During a reconnaissance mission over Tepelenë on 13 February, Sottotenente Ugo Drago of 363ª *Squadriglia* was credited with his fourth kill in the form of a Greek Battle shot down in the Argyrokastron valley. There are no details from Greek records to corroborate this claim, however.

On the 27th nine Blenheim Is of No 211 Sqn and three from No 11 Sqn, escorted by eight Hurricanes Is from Nos 80 and 33 Sqns, mounted another raid on Valona. Three CR.42s of 364ª *Squadriglia* scrambled to intercept them, and they caught the Blenheim Is during their attack. Five were damaged, three of them from No 11 Sqn. Two of the bombers sustained hydraulic system damage and crash-landed on their return to Paramythia – No 11 Sqn's N3579 was later written off. In the meantime, the escorting Hurricane Is were involved in a fierce dogfight during which they shot down two CR.42s. Their pilots, formation leader Sottotenente Pasquale Faltoni and Sergente Osvaldo Bartolaccini, were both wounded, with the latter ultimately succumbing to his wounds.

Another CR.42 of 150° *Gruppo's* 364ª *Squadriglia* was destroyed on the ground, with several others damaged and 12 fuel drums left blazing. Two airmen were wounded. Pattle's Hurricane I was the only RAF fighter to be damaged, the fuel tank ahead of the cockpit being struck by a single bullet.

The *Regia Aeronautica* immediately reacted to the appearance of Hurricane Is in Greece by despatching C.200 *Saetta* (Thunderbolt) monoplane fighters to the Albanian-Greek front in March. The new aircraft were deployed by 363ª and 371ª *Squadriglie*, the latter unit serving with 150° *Gruppo* between 4 March and 10 July.

On 15 March Valona was again attacked by British bombers, eight Blenheim Is of Nos 84 and 211 Sqns dropping their loads and destroying a CR.42 of 150° *Gruppo's* 364ª *Squadriglia*. Two days later, during a strafing attack on Katzika airfield by three CR.42s, anti-aircraft fire hit the fighter of Capitano Luigi Corsini, forcing him to bail out during his return flight. There was another loss for 363ª *Squadriglia* on 21 March when Sottotenente Enrico Pani was killed in a flying accident.

In April, with the Wehrmacht driving through Yugoslavia and into Greece, the war in the Balkans at last reached its bloody climax. One of the last ground attack missions to be mounted by 150° *Gruppo* was carried out on the 19th when 13 C.200s led by Tenente Colonello Pratelli strafed the aerodromes at Katzika and Yanina. The Macchi pilots claimed to have destroyed four Gladiators and one twin-engined aircraft, but they were either dummies or machines that had already been abandoned.

The war in Greece ended on 23 April, by which time 150° *Gruppo* had been credited with 50 confirmed aerial victories and 17 probables, plus 35 aircraft destroyed on the ground. In recognition of this success the *gruppo* received the Silver Medal for Military Valour.

Despite fighting in the Balkans having ended with the signing of armistices between the victorious Italo-German allies and the defeated Yugoslav and Greek governments, 150° *Gruppo* continued to operate in the area. Indeed, 363ª *Squadriglia* was subsequently transferred to Tirana airport, although fuel shortages meant that the unit's C.200s did very little flying. Things got so bad that ten *Asso di Bastoni* C.200s had to be withdrawn from the flypast of Athens by units that had contributed to the Axis victory in the Balkans.

364ª and 365ª *Squadriglie*, meanwhile, had both been posted back to Italy in late March. On 27 April and again on 30 May, pilots from these units ferried CR.42s to fighter units in Italian North Africa.

Sufficient fuel had reached Tirana by 4 May to allow three CR.42s of 363ª *Squadriglia* to provide air cover for Italian troops landing in Argostoli Bay. Six days later eight 363ª and 371ª *Squadriglie* fighters escorted the aircraft carrying Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III from Brindisi to Tirana. Eight other 150° *Gruppo* aircraft would escort him on his return flight on 17 May.

On 1 June 363ª *Squadriglia* was re-deployed to the Greek airfield of Araxos to provide escorts for Italian naval convoys bound for the Greek mainland. However, the unit arrived at its new base lacking

Two pilots of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* pictured at Araxos airfield in Greece, which between June and November 1941 was 363ª *Squadriglia's* base for escort missions for Italian ships bound for Greece (*AM*)

some essential ground equipment, and this delayed operational flying. The latter resumed when the C.200s flew four patrols to escort Royal Italian Navy minelayers through the Ionian Sea and to provide cover for a naval convoy in the same area. The unit was scrambled once from Araxos during this period but no contact was made.

Meanwhile, after a rest period at Rome-Ciampino airfield, 364ª and 365ª *Squadriglie* completed their transition to the C.200 and, on 12 June, returned to Albania. Three days prior to their departure four C.200s from each *squadriglia* had been equipped with type ARC 1 radios. Whilst the units were flying east a handful of *gruppo* pilots began ferrying captured Yugoslav Bücker biplane trainers and Hawker Fury II biplanes back to Italy as war prizes.

In July 150° *Gruppo* carried out training flights, patrols and reconnaissance missions, as well as escorting Axis shipping. On the 7th, for example, six 363ª *Squadriglia* aircraft protected a naval convoy passing through the Ionian Sea. Two days later Sottotenente Ugo Drago was scrambled but failed to make any contact with the enemy. On the 11th two 363ª *Squadriglia* C.200s flown by Capitano Mariotti and Tenente Atti reconnoitred the Peloponnese looking for suitable sites that could be used as airfields.

COUNTER-INSURGENCY

During the month of July 363ª *Squadriglia* pilots also flew 37 sorties in CR.42s, the biplanes now being used for counter-insurgency, strafing and bombing in the fight against Montenegrin partisans, whose revolt against the Italian occupation had broken out on the 13th. Ahead of the 150° *Gruppo* move to Montenegro on 19 July, where it would undertake counter-insurgency operations against the local rebels, six 364ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s were posted to Scutari airfield in northern Albania to carry out strafing missions in the Podgorica-Cettigne area.

After the *squadriglia* pilots had been briefed by the local Italian Army commander, five CR.42s set off on the 19th to strafe Montenegrin guerrillas in the Cevo area. These sorties continued the next day when six CR.42s attacked insurgents in the Ocinic-Vrelo-Ugnji areas. Two days later, ten Fiat biplanes flew offensive sweeps around Sozina and Vukovici, while the following day eight fighters made a series of attacks on the rebels near Utra, Brceli, Satonici, Stojanovici, Prentovici and Martinovici.

On 23 July 364ª *Squadriglia* returned to Tirana, its place being taken at Scutari by 363ª *Squadriglia*. The unit flew its first five attack sorties the very next day over Uba, Vaci Do, Sclo and Resna. On the 28th three CR.42s carried out strafing attacks in the Meljak area.

Meanwhile, throughout July, 150° *Gruppo* pilots continued to ferry captured Yugoslav aircraft to Italy. On the 16th a Breguet XIX that was being flown from Niksic to Tirana force-landed due to engine failure. Its pilot, Sergente Pietro Secchi of 365ª *Squadriglia*, was captured by Montenegrin rebels.

Counter-insurgency action continued in August, with 44 sorties being flown by 363ª and 365ª *Squadriglie* CR.42s from the 6th. On the 14th the CR.42-equipped counter-insurgency section of 150° *Gruppo* returned to Tirana airport to end its operational tour over Montenegro. During this latter period the CR.42s of the two *squadriglie* had over-flown Montenegrin rebel strongholds at places like Savnik, Niksic, Cevo, Kolasin and Djakovo.

The movement of captured Yugoslav aircraft to Italy was maintained during August, *gruppo* pilots flying out five Rogozarski PVT parasol trainers on the 11th and three more on the 22nd, together with two Dewoitines and two Potez 25 biplanes.

Beside this unusual aerial activity, *gruppo* personnel intensified their unit training programme by flying solo and formation aerobatics and receiving training in advanced fighter tactics. There were several accidents during this period, with Sergente Maggiore Aldo Innocenti of 365ª *Squadriglia* perishing in a crash on 22 August. September started badly when Sottotenente Romeo Della Costanza of 363ª *Squadriglia* was also killed in an accident involving a C.200. A veteran of the hard-fought winter air war over Albania, he was sorely missed within the *gruppo*. The training continued nevertheless, and there were also some scrambles flown from Araxos airfield. All were fruitless. On 13 September eight fighters were required to provide cover for the steamer *Oriani*, which had been torpedoed on the 11th southwest of Cape Papas by three Blenheim IVs of No 105 Sqn.

At around this time a nightfighter section was also formed comprising pilots and groundcrews drawn from 150° *Gruppo squadriglie*. Equipped with seven CR.42s, it was based at Tatoi airfield in Greece.

There were more scrambles by C.200 and CR.42 pilots from Araxos and Tatoi in October, but again no intruders were intercepted. On the 26th of that month three C.200s twice flew patrols between Tatoi and Corinth. Training activity intensified in November when 150° *Gruppo* participated in interception exercises with German Ju 88s, with good results reported. The *gruppo* also flew over the Ionian islands (mainly in the Cefalonia and Argostoli areas) and performed naval escort duties. A convoy escort mission was carried out on 3 November when Tenente Mario Mecatti and Maresciallo Guidi of 364ª *Squadriglia* patrolled west of Argostoli. Four days later two C.200s of 364ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Tenente Mario Mecatti and Sergente Adriano Patrioli, were scrambled, but the latter was killed when his *Saetta* crashed for reasons unknown.

In 1941, the training flights undertaken by 363ª *Squadriglia* pilots totalled 1300 hours. This figure included more than 100 hours between18 February and 12 March when the unit's pilots transitioned to the C.200 at Rome-Ciampino airport. At the same time the pilots of 364ª and 365ª *Squadriglie* flew 1700 hours of training flights between them, and this figure included their transition to the C.200 between mid March and 12 June, also at Rome-Ciampino.

The availability of 150° *Gruppo* aircraft was considered more than satisfactory for much of 1941, with a daily average of 40 C.200s and six CR.42s being reported as airworthy from 12 June. During November, however, this total fell to as few as 26 airworthy Macchis. This was due to engines being plagued by chronic oil leaks, which in turn resulted in at least nine powerplants having to be changed. Personnel had to remain at Tirana and Araxos to complete the engine changes while the rest of the *gruppo* moved to North Africa, thus signalling an end to 53° *Stormo's* Greek deployment.

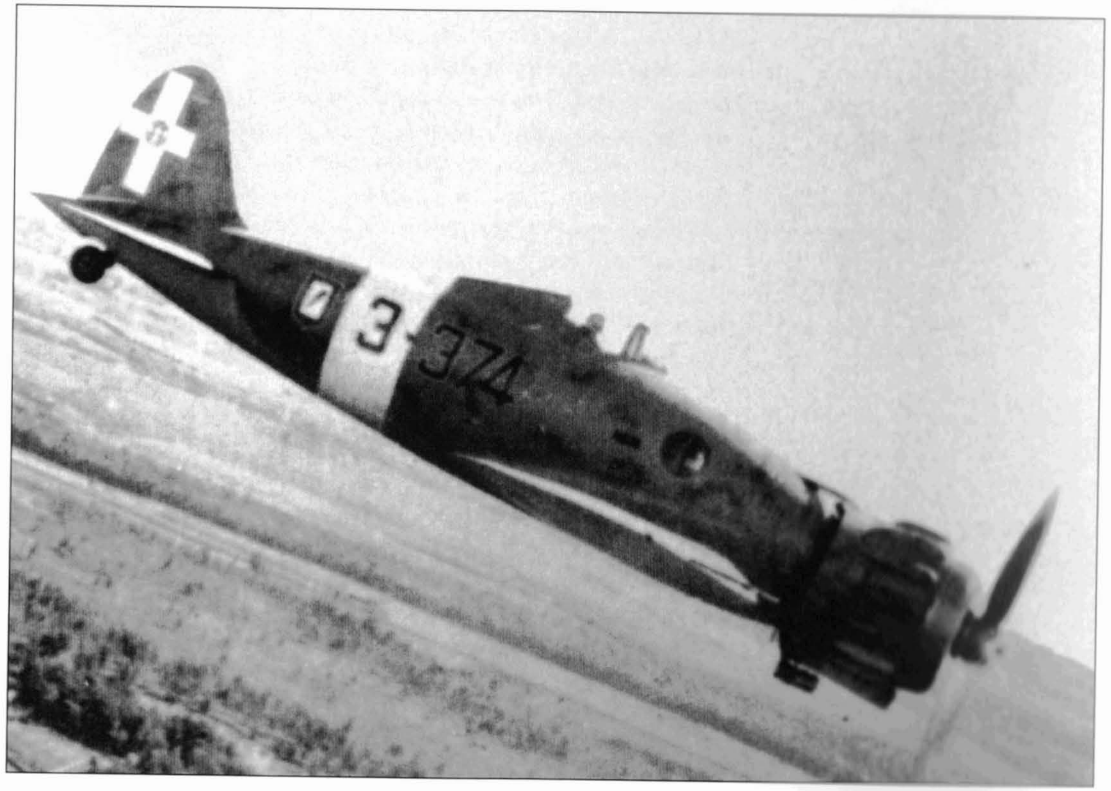
On 14 December 1941 23 C.200s landed at Libya's Tripoli-Castel Benito airport, having flown via Comiso, Sicily, and the island of Pantelleria, to inaugurate the deployment to North Africa of 150° *Gruppo*. The groundcrews arrived two days later aboard an SM.82 transport aircraft. The *gruppo* commenced its operational tour by reinforcing Tripoli's air defences, logging 180 flying hours patrolling the harbour area, making sweeps over Axis communication lines and escorting shipping bound for Libya.

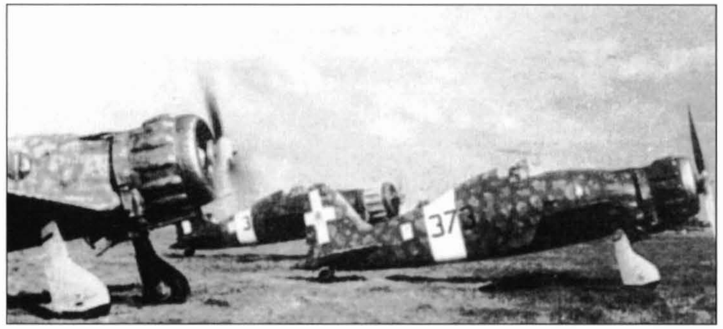
The first air combat for 150° *Gruppo* in its new location came on 19 December when a C.200 flown by Maggiore Antonio Vizzotto attacked nine Blenheim IV bombers. Vizzotto had been alerted to the intruders by radio, and he waded into the formation with vigour, firing at five of the bombers and forcing them to break off their attack after jettisoning their ordnance into the sea.

150° *Gruppo* was reinforced by the arrival of C.200-equipped 357ª *Squadriglia* from 157° *Gruppo* on 29 December. This unit was immediately re-designated 364ª *Squadriglia*. That same day the *gruppo* moved to En Nofilia airfield via Tamet, and 48 hours later it took charge of the last airworthy *Saettas* of the departing 153° *Gruppo*. The latter unit would subsequently become a part of 53° *Stormo*.

153° *Gruppo*, also known as *Asso di Bastoni* ('Ace of Clubs'), was formed on 23 April 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. Designated XXIII *Gruppo*, it consisted of 18ª, 19ª and 20ª *Squadriglie*. The *gruppo* owed its 'Ace of Clubs' nickname and unit emblem to its first CO, Maggiore Andrea Zotti, who had in turn borrowed it from 20ª *Squadriglia*. During the war in Spain at least seven of its pilots were awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour, although only one of them, Tenente Gilberto Caselli, was still with the unit when it became a part of 53° *Stormo*. Re-designated 153° *Gruppo*, the unit moved to Treviso airport in northern Italy, where it was reorganised into three *Squadriglie* – 372ª, 373ª and 374ª – reporting to 54° *Stormo* CT.

C.200 374-3 of 153° *Gruppo's* 374ª *Squadriglia* on patrol over Taranto, an important base of the Royal Italian Navy. This unit was based at Grottaglie airport from November 1940 (*AM*)





C.200s of 153° *Gruppo's* 373ª *Squadriglia* about to go on patrol (*AM*)

***Regia Aeronautica* personnel push a C.200 of 372ª *Squadriglia* into its dispersal area at Brindisi during 153° *Gruppo's* operational tour in Apulia, which ran from the winter of 1940 through to the spring of 1941 (*AM*)**

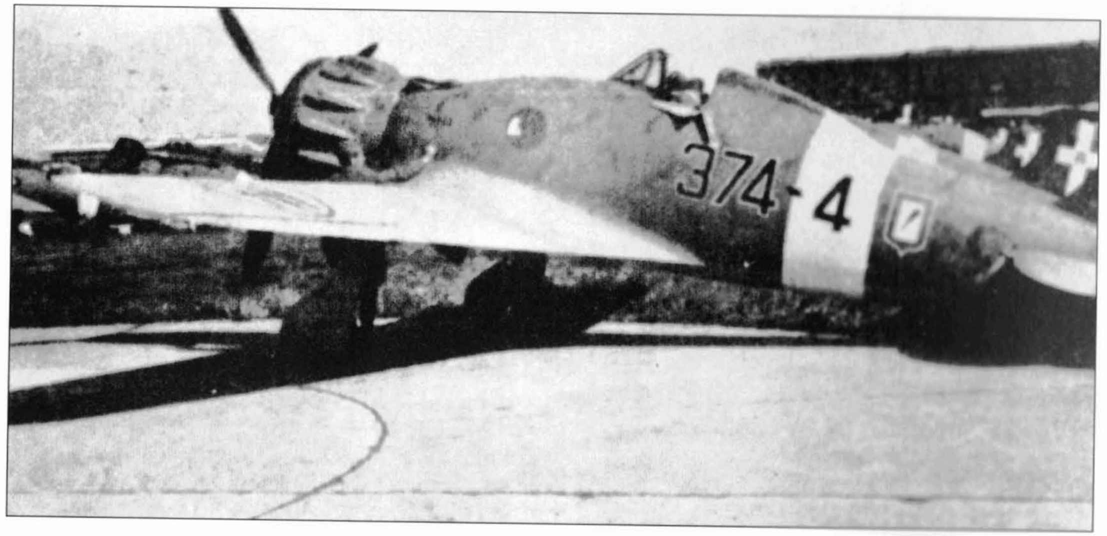
Six pilots of 153° *Gruppo's* 372ª *Squadriglia* are pictured at Brindisi airport in Apulia, southern Italy – a base from which these men had been flying defensive patrols to guard the region against the threat of British air attacks since November 1940 (*AM*)

A group of seven 373ª *Squadriglia* fighter pilots pictured with a canine friend at Bari airport during the winter of 1940-41 (*AM*)

Following the outbreak of World War 2, 153° *Gruppo* participated in the campaign against France in the summer of 1940, before being transferred to Apulia in early November. There, it became autonomous, with 372ª, 373ª and 374ª *Squadriglie* being based at Brindisi, Bari and Grottaglie, respectively. The unit was later transferred to the Balkans, where it flew bomber escort missions and made strafing attacks on enemy airfields and vehicles. On 6 December nine C.200s of 152° *Gruppo's* 370ª *Squadriglia* moved to Foggia airfield for temporary attachment to 153° *Gruppo*, tasked with the air defence of Apulia. Two weeks later, on 20 December, 153° *Gruppo* flew its first operation on the new front when ten C.200s strafed Greek troops near Sobot Borsch, on the Albanian coast.

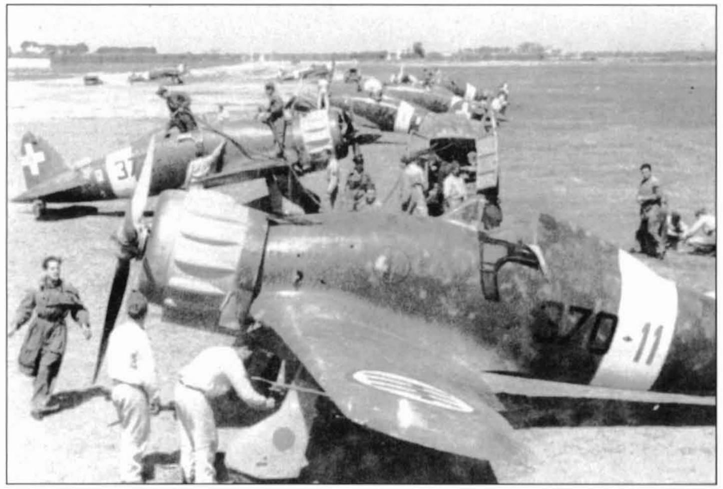
It was not until March 1941 that the pilots of 153° *Gruppo* encountered the RAF. At 0635 hrs on the 22nd, 29 C.200s set off from Lecce and Brindisi airfields to strafe Paramythia. There, eight Macchis destroyed three Blenheim Is of No 211 Sqn (L8531, L1490 and L8533). Meanwhile, another 21 C.200s patrolled overhead and had an inconclusive encounter with No 112 Sqn Gladiator IIs flown by Flt Lt J F Fraser and Plt Off Neville Bowker. That afternoon another 27 Macchis again strafed the airfield, setting a No 80 Sqn Gladiator II on fire and doing further damage to an unserviceable Wellington of No 37 Sqn.

The 'Ace of Clubs' C.200s paid a further two visits to Paramythia on the 26th. At 0650 hrs they fought off a section of No 112 Sqn Gladiator IIs led by Flt Lt 'Algy' Schwab, and at 1250 hrs they were met by four Gladiator IIs of No 112 Sqn flown by Schwab, Bowker and Plt Offs D G MacDonald and P L C Brunton. Bowker's aircraft was badly shot-up, but he made a successful force-landing on the airfield. Schwab pursued a C.200 to the coast and claimed to have probably shot it down into the sea off Perdika, although no losses were reported at that time and place by 153° *Gruppo*. Two Macchis succeeded in strafing the aerodrome, destroying a No 112 Sqn Gladiator II and again hitting the already wrecked Wellington.



Line-up of 374ª *Squadriglia* C.200s pictured at an Italian base. The aircraft in the foreground displays unit numerals 374-4 and the 'Ace of Clubs' unit badge behind the white fuselage band (*AM*)

Although of poor quality, this photograph from an Italian wartime magazine is interesting because it shows Maggiore Andrea Favini, who led 374ª *Squadriglia* between July 1939 and April 1940. He subsequently became CO of 153° *Gruppo* in November 1940, and he remained in this position until April 1943 (*via Author*)



On 6 December 1940 nine C.200s of 152° *Gruppo's* 370ª *Squadriglia* were transferred to Foggia airport for temporary attachment to 153° *Gruppo*. These aircraft helped to reinforce the defences of the Apulia region (*AM*)

Pre-flight briefing for 153° *Gruppo* C.200 pilots before an operational sortie in 1941 (*AM*)

C.200s of 153° *Gruppo* provide close escort for Ju 87B Stukas of 239ª *Squadriglia*, 97° *Gruppo* BaT (*Bombardamento a Tuffo*) that are on their way to attack Greek targets on the Albanian front in March 1941 (*AM*)

C.200s of 153° *Gruppo's* 372ª *Squadriglia* sit at readiness at Brindisi during the Balkan campaign in April 1941. The aircraft in the foreground displays fuselage codes 372-6, while those behind are coded 372-7 and 372-3 *(AM)*

On 14 April 153° *Gruppo* C.200s were escorting ten Z.1007bis bombers of 35° *Stormo* when they were intercepted near Yanina by nine Gladiators of 21 *Mira*. Two of the Greek fighters were claimed as destroyed, one by a bomber gunner and the other by a Macchi pilot, but 21 *Mira* suffered no losses during this combat. Five days later 153° *Gruppo's* 374ª *Squadriglia* was transferred to North Africa, but it was not until 22 May, following the Axis victory in the Balkans, that the rest of the *gruppo* moved to Rome's Ciampino airport.

153° *Gruppo* pilots brief beside a line-up of 372ª *Squadriglia* C.200s, with 372-12 in the foreground. The aircraft are being serviced at Brindisi in 1941 (*AM*)

AUTONOMOUS IN AFRICA

It was in the late afternoon of 8 September 1940 that personnel of 151° *Gruppo* caught their first glimpse of North Africa when they arrived at Tripoli's Castel Benito airport at 1645 hrs. Operating as an autonomous unit independent of 53° *Stormo*, the *gruppo's* next four months would be a period of intense activity that saw it regularly fighting with the RAF. Between 11 September and 30 October 151° *Gruppo* was based at a number of airfields, including Benghazi, El Adem, Ain el Gazala and Amseat A3. From these sites the *gruppo* would carry out patrols and escort Italian shipping bound for Libya.

On 16 September two 368ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s scrambled from Benina at 2000 hrs. Tenente Giuseppe Zuffi subsequently intercepted a British bomber and claimed to have probably shot it down. He spotted that one of the aircraft's engines was glowing red as it disappeared into the night sky, Zuffi assuming that his attacks had started a fire. Two days later a section of three 368ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s flown by Zuffi and Sergente Maggiori Annibale Ricotti and Alvise Andrich scrambled at 1215 hrs to catch a reconnaissance Blenheim that had been spotted over Benghazi. Flying at more than 16,000 ft, the three Fiats closed in to attack. Both Zuffi and Ricotti fired at the British intruder, but it escaped after a lengthy chase, trailing smoke from its port engine. Zuffi claimed it probably shot down over Wadi Tamet.

Tenente Mario Ferrero of 366ª *Squadriglia* joined six CR.42s of 97ª *Squadriglia*, 9° *Gruppo*, 4° *Stormo* covering Italian troops in the Giarabub sector on 27 September, the fighters intercepting 11 Blenheim Is of No 55 Sqn, led by Flt Lt R B Cox, over El Garn ul Grein. Two stragglers from 'C' Flight, L8394/L and L8454 flown by Plt Offs A S B Godrich and I Hook, respectively, were attacked by the Fiats. Capitano

366ª *Squadriglia* pilots are pictured at Amseat airfield, Libya. 151° *Gruppo* CR.42s began operations in North Africa in September 1940, and they were in the thick of the fighting into 1941 (*AM*)

Antonio Larsimont Pergameni, Sergente Franco Sarasino and Sottotenente Giovanni Barcaro shot down Plt Off Godrich's machine, killing both him and his crew (Sgts W C Clarke and W H Thompson). The three Italian pilots then joined Ferrero, who in the meantime had attacked other Blenheims from the leading section. He claimed one as a probable, yet all but one of the No 55 Sqn aircraft reported sustaining no damage. The exception was L8454, crewed by Plt Off Hook and Sgts W F Bowker and J Rigby. This aircraft was severely damaged by Tenenti Ezio Viglione Borghese and Riccardo Vaccari and Sergente Angelo Golino.

The last day of October was a particularly noteworthy one for 151° *Gruppo*, as Menastir and Gambut airfields were attacked by nine Blenheim Is from Nos 211 and 84 Sqns. The bombers were led by Sqn Ldr J R Gordon-Finlayson and escorted by eight Gladiator IIs and two Hurricane Is from No 80 Sqn. The British formation was intercepted by two CR.42s of 366ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Sottotenente Carlo Albertini and Sergente Maggiore Roberto Marchi. Scrambled at 1010 hrs from Amseat A3, Albertini claimed a Hurricane as a probable.

At around 1300 hrs 19 CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo*, led by Maggiore Calosso, together with 18 aircraft from 2° *Stormo's* 13° *Gruppo*, were escorting 26 SM.79 bombers from 9° and 14° *Stormi* and 33° *Gruppo* over Mersa Matruh when they encountered RAF fighters. A dozen Hurricane Is of No 33 Sqn and nine Gladiator IIs from No 112 Sqn intercepted the Italian formation and a fierce dogfight ensured. The 151° *Gruppo* pilots claimed to have shot down three Hurricanes and two Gladiators, with two further Hurricanes and a Gladiator as probables, for no loss. Tenente Mario Ferrero of 366ª *Squadriglia* had his guns jam after he had fired at three Hurricanes, before he was in turn attacked by another, possibly P3725 flown by Flg Off F S Holman. Ferrero managed to escape, returning to A3 with his CR.42 holed and slightly damaged.

366ª *Squadriglia* CO Capitano Bernardino Serafini claimed a Hurricane and a share in damaging another with Sergente Maggiore Colauzzi of 368ª *Squadriglia*. A British fighter was seen leaving the engagement trailing smoke, and this may have been Flg Off J M Littler's aircraft, which was severely damaged. 366ª *Squadriglia's* Sergente Maggiore Roberto Marchi also shot down a Gladiator that had previously been engaged by Serafini. Among 368ª *Squadriglia* pilots, Sergente Maggiore Davide Colauzzi and Sergente Mario Turchi each shot down a Hurricane in flames, while Capitano Bruno Locatelli was credited with having damaged a third Hurricane, and setting a Gladiator on fire over the sea. Pilots of 13° *Gruppo* claimed to have downed four Gladiators and two monoplane fighters, although Sottotenente Gianfranco Perversi was killed.

No 33 Sqn admitted the loss of two Hurricane Is, with Flg Off E K Leveille killed and Flg Off P R St Quintin safe. No 112 Sqn reported losing Flg Off R H Clark and five Gladiators, two of which had been shot down while three fell victim to accidents. Despite these losses, the RAF fighters had downed two SM.79s of 11ª *Squadriglia*, 26° *Gruppo*, 9° *Stormo* BT and a CR.42 from 13° *Gruppo*. Six more SM.79s from 14° *Stormo's* 44° *Gruppo* and one from 9° *Stormo* were damaged, two of which crash-landed and were written off.

151° *Gruppo* pilots attend Sunday Mass at Amseat airfield in the early autumn of 1940 (*AM*)

The day's activity ended at 1625 hrs when Sottotenente Furio Lauri and Sergente Ernesto De Bellis of 368ª *Squadriglia* were scrambled to intercept a Blenheim. Lauri broke off the combat when his guns jammed.

There was to be no let-up over the following months, with the Italian fighter units involved in both aerial battles and strafing attacks on Allied armoured formations. On 16 November six CR.42s (three each from 366ª and 368ª *Squadriglie*) intercepted No 208 Sqn Lysander I L4686 over Maktila. The aircraft's destruction was jointly claimed by Tenente Mario Ferrero and Sergente Maggiore Cesare Chiarmetta of 366ª *Squadriglia*. Flg Off Benson and Sgt Phillips were both wounded in this engagement, and a CR.42 was also lost, together with its pilot, Tenente Raimondo Sacchetti of 368ª *Squadriglia*.

At 0650 hrs on the 24th Sottotenente Amedeo Guidi of 366ª *Squadriglia* intercepted a Blenheim I of No 55 Sqn over Bardia. After 20 minutes of combat, Guidi ran out of ammunition, having fired 1200 rounds. The Blenheim I flew off trailing smoke from its right engine. The squadron later reported that two of its aircraft had been damaged in combat that day, L8531, piloted by Flg Off K H A Ellis, and L8514, flown by Sgt E P Vignaux.

COMPASS OFFENSIVE

On 9 December 1940 British forces launched Operation *Compass*, which had initially been conceived as a limited offensive aimed at driving the Italians out of Egypt. However, it was to turn into one of the most spectacular Allied victories of the war, for it not only drove the Italians out of Egypt, but also out of Cyrenaica. It fact it drove deep into eastern and central Libya. The *Regia Aeronautica* threw all of its available aircraft into halting the advance, and the pilots of 151° *Gruppo* found themselves in the thick of it, flying sorties on the opening day of the British attack.

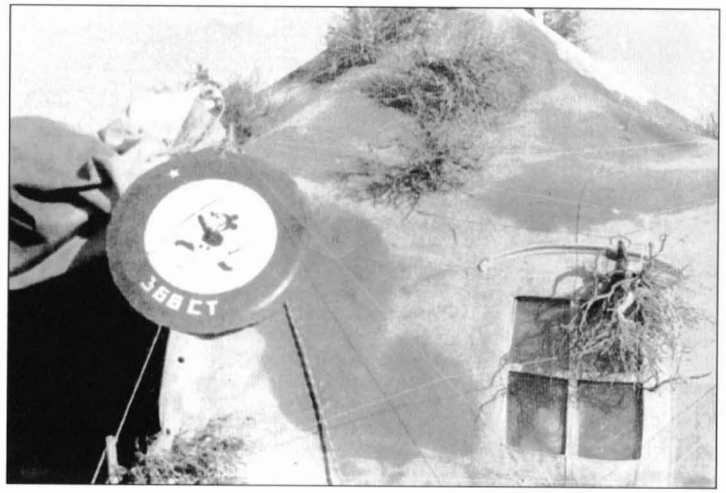
The *gruppo* commander, Maggiore Carlo Calosso, had been ordered to keep his unit on alert through the night of 8/9 December. Shortly after daybreak four CR.42s of 366ª *Squadriglia* took off, these aircraft being flown by Sottotenente Carlo Albertini, Sergente Rosario Di Carlo, Tenente Guglielmo Chiarini and Sergente Maggiore Cesare Chiarmetta.

Minutes later Chiarmetta and Chiarini attempted to engage a Blenheim IV high above the airfield. Having evaded all of Chiarmetta's attempts at interception, the British bomber was then attacked by Chiarini. The CR.42 pilot fired a few bursts into the Blenheim IV's belly, setting it on fire. The blazing aircraft duly crashed southwest of Alam Rabia, exploding when it hit the ground. That day the British reported the loss of Blenheim Mk IV T2073 of No 113 Sqn, which had taken off from LG 68 airstrip (also known as Waterloo). This aircraft crashed near Sidi Barrani for an 'unknown reason', its pilot, Plt Off J N Owen, being injured and crewmen Sgts A M Goldfeather and J Crawford killed. This report would appear to tally with Chiarini's account, the ace returning to base at 0830 hrs after firing 266 rounds.

Thirty minutes after Chiarini landed, four CR.42s were scrambled to intercept approaching British aircraft. The Italian fighters were led by Capitano Bernardino Serafini (CO of 366ª *Squadriglia*), who was accompanied by Sottotenente Amedeo Guidi and Sergenti Maggiori Cesare Chiarmetta and Roberto Marchi. In the meantime two Blenheims had dropped their bombs on Sollum ridge, causing no damage, and as the Italian fighters attempted to intercept them Chiarmetta and Marchi were jumped by a Hurricane I that had dived on the Italian fighters from out of the clouds. Chiarmetta was able to fire a burst totalling 87 rounds at the British machine, which dived away towards Allied territory.

Sottotenente Guidi had seen this short combat and set off after the Hurricane I. After a prolonged chase, which took both hunter and hunted 19 miles into British-held territory, the RAF pilot suddenly wheeled his fighter around to make a head-on attack on the Italian machine. Guidi managed to close in, firing at the Hurricane I, which was last seen going down trailing black smoke. Throughout this action Guidi had fired a total of 207 rounds. The fighter had probably come from No 33 Sqn, as this unit had been busy flying strafing attacks that morning, and it later reported that one of its Hurricane Is had made a forced-landing. All four CR.42s had returned home by 0950 hrs.

There was to be no respite for the men of 151° *Gruppo*, however, as a short time later Maggiore Calosso ordered his pilots to make a strafing attack on British armoured vehicle concentrations sighted between Bir Enba and Buq Buq. Six CR.42s of 366ª *Squadriglia* took off at 1050 hrs, these aircraft being flown by Capitano Serafini, Tenente Veneziani, Sottotenente Guidi, Maresciallo Accorsi, Sergente Maggiore Marchi and Sergente Eugenio Cicognani. When the pilots reached the target area, formation leader Capitano Serafini dived down to attack, followed by the remaining five Fiats in line astern. All made six low-level firing passes, during which the Italian pilots claimed to have set an armoured car on fire and damaged 30 other vehicles. Throughout the action the biplanes fired a combined total of more than 2000 rounds of ammunition. Upon their return to base at 1155 hrs, the pilots reported that the anti-aircraft fire had been inaccurate and weak.



The 366ª *Squadriglia* HQ at Amseat airfield in autumn 1940 has been decorated with a warlike Mickey Mouse (*Topolino*) armed with a bow and arrow (*AM*)

At 1515 hrs ten CR.42s set off to join 19 others from 9° *Gruppo* that were escorting SM.79 bombers attacking targets in the Bir Enba sector. The 151° *Gruppo* formation comprised eight 368ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s led by Capitano Bruno Locatelli, with Sergente Maggiore Fiorenzo Milella of 366ª *Squadriglia* attached. Over Buq Buq, the 151° *Gruppo* Fiats intercepted a lone No 274 Sqn Hurricane I that was strafing the coast road. Locatelli, Sottotenente Furio Lauri, Tenente Orfeo Paroli and Sergente Ernesto De Bellis together claimed to have sent the fighter down in flames south of Bir Enba, although No 274 Sqn reported no corresponding loss. The 151° *Gruppo* CR.42s landed back at base at 1650 hrs.

Meanwhile, eight CR.42s of 367ª *Squadriglia* were strafing the Sidi Barrani-Bir Enba road when they also encountered a solitary Hurricane. Sergente Tolmino Zanarini fired at it but failed to register any hits. This episode brought a day of frenetic action to a close for the 151° *Gruppo* pilots. Altogether, 366ª and 368ª *Squadriglie* had expended a combined total of 2562 rounds of ammunition, claimed three aerial victories (two of which were admitted by the British) and created havoc among advancing columns of enemy vehicles.

A CR.42 was lost on 10 December when 21 fighters drawn from all three 151° *Gruppo squadriglie* escorted Breda Ba.65s over the Buq Buq-Bir Enba sector at 1530 hrs. The formation was jumped by four Gladiator IIs from No 3 Sqn RAAF, and 367ª *Squadriglia*'s Sergente Maggiore Gino Bogoni failed to return. The CR.42s flown by Capitano Irzio Bozzolan, Sergente Maggiore Rodolfo Benco and Sergente Tolmino Zanarini were also damaged. Sqn Ldr Ian McLachlan, Flt Lt G H Steege and Flg Off A A Gatward claimed one kill apiece. On the way back to base, 368ª *Squadriglia* intercepted a Hurricane I strafing the Sidi Barrani-Buq-Buq road. Capitano Bruno Locatelli, Sergente Maggiore Davide Colauzzi, Sergente Ottorino Ambrosi and Tenente Giuseppe Zuffi attacked the aircraft and claimed to have damaged it. No 33 Sqn reported losing two Hurricane Is that day (P3728 and P3824), the latter, piloted by Lt Jacobus George Fischer SAAF, failing to return from a lone evening reconnaissance mission.

The dramatic events of 11 December would earn 151° *Gruppo* its first unit badge, which featured the *Braccio di Ferro* ('Arm of Iron'). The action began at 1445 hrs when nine CR.42s of 366ª *Squadriglia* were attacked by a single Hurricane I (P3726) of No 33 Sqn, flown by Flg Off Charles 'Deadstick' Dyson. The British pilot fired on the tailend CR.42 flown by Sergente Eugenio Cicognani, wounding him in the head, right leg and right arm – the latter subsequently had to be amputated. Before bailing out, and despite his wounds, Cicognani managed to warn his leader, Capitano Serafini, of the high-flying enemy aircraft attacking the Italian formation. To commemorate this incident, the *gruppo* adopted a rhomboidal-shaped emblem featuring an iron arm drawing a bow.

Sergente Maggiore Ottorino Ambrosi was one of the young fighter pilots who served with 53° *Stormo* in World War 2. He saw service with 151° *Gruppo's* 368ª *Squadriglia* mainly in the North African and Mediterranean theatres. Ambrosi received the Silver and Bronze Medals for Military Valour, the latter decoration being awarded after he had shot down a No 110 Sqn Blenheim off Tripoli on 9 July 1941. Ambrosi survived the war and died on 11 August 1990 (*Ambrosi/Ala Tricolore*)

After a long chase Dyson was shot down by Sottotenente Guidi of 366ª *Squadriglia* and Capitano Locatelli and Sergente Maggiore Colauzzi of 368ª *Squadriglia*. Colauzzi's Fiat was also damaged in the encounter. The British pilot bailed out and later returned to his unit to claim the improbable score of six CR.42s (plus one probable) and one bomber shot down. Sottotenente Lauri of 368ª *Squadriglia* had, meanwhile, engaged in a duel with a No 274 Sqn Hurricane I (P3722) flown by Plt Off E M 'Imshi' Mason. Each claimed to have shot the other down, Mason reporting that Lauri had crashed near Qur el Beid. The Italian managed to limp back to his base with his badly damaged fighter, however.

On the 13th 11 CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo* encountered Hurricane Is of No 33 Sqn south of Halfaya. In the ensuing combat Tenente Piero Veneziani and Sergente Maggiore Cesare Chiarmetta of 366ª *Squadriglia* fired at one Hurricane, while another CR.42 from this unit, piloted by Maresciallo Giulio Cesare, was badly damaged.

At 0810 hrs the following day another group of 11 CR.42s from 151° *Gruppo* set off on a sweep over the Sollum area. They intercepted nine Blenheims (eight Mk IVs of No 55 Sqn and one Mk I from No 11 Sqn) attacking Bardia. This was the signal for the start of a running battle in which the Italians claimed three kills, one probable and five damaged. The lion's share went to 366ª *Squadriglia*, whose pilots shared one kill and one probable. Sottotenente Guidi claimed two kills and a probable and Tenente Chiarini one damaged. In fact three Blenheims were lost and another five damaged. No 55 Sqn's L8790 was shot down into the sea, killing Flg Off M S Singleton and Sgts E P Chapman and B J Fox. T1872 was damaged beyond repair, but its crew of Flg Off K H A Ellis and Sgts I Browning and J E Perkins were unhurt, while T2113 (Flg Off Potter) and T2049 (Plt Off Blignaut) were both damaged. Blenheim I L8395 of No 11 Sqn, piloted by Sgt Bailey, with Sgts E Maltby and G W H Ware, was damaged beyond repair.

On 19 December 11 CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo*, led by Capitano Simeone Marsan of 367ª *Squadriglia*, engaged six Hurricane Is (probably from No 274 Sqn) south of Sidi Azeis at 1215 hrs. In the action that followed three Fiat fighters were badly damaged, Sergente Ricotti's so severely that it had to be written off. But the Italians shared in the probable destruction of a Hurricane I and damaged three others. Of this score, 368ª *Squadriglia* pilots claimed the probable, while Capitano Locatelli damaged two of the three fighters. Flt Lt J Lapsley and 2Lt R H Talbot of No 274 Sqn were each credited with downing a CR.42, while Plt Off A A P Weller took on no less than seven SM.79s. He claimed to have damaged one prior to his aircraft being riddled by return fire.

NEW YEAR

The first major combat of 1941 for 151° *Gruppo* came on 23 January when Sergente Maggiore Ezio Masenti of 368ª *Squadriglia* claimed to have shot a Blenheim down in flames. Two days later Maraua was bombed at around midday by eight Blenheim IVs of No 55 Sqn. They were intercepted by a lone 367ª *Squadriglia* CR.42 piloted by Sergente Stefano Fiore, which was hit by return fire. Meanwhile, Maresciallo Giovanni Accorsi of 366ª *Squadriglia* claimed to have shot down a lone Blenheim reconnaissance aircraft.

In the early afternoon of the 26th two Hurricane Is of No 274 Sqn flown by Flg Offs 'Imshi' Mason and T L 'Pat' Patterson attacked ten 151° *Gruppo* CR.42s (seven from 368ª and three from 366ª *Squadriglie*) that were busy strafing Australian troops southeast of Derna. In the action with 368ª *Squadriglia*, Mason's Hurricane I (P3722) was hit by Sergente Maggiore Annibale Ricotti and forced down, but not before 'Imshi' had shot down and killed Sottotenente Alfonso Nuti and Maresciallo Guido Paparatti. Tenente Giuseppe Zuffi claimed a second Hurricane I as a probable.

Four days later, on 30 January, a single CR.42 (MM6255) flown by Sergente Mario Turchi of 368ª *Squadriglia* was scrambled from Benina to intercept two Hurricane Is from No 274 Sqn, again flown by Mason and Patterson. After a long and gallant battle, Turchi managed to damage both aircraft (P3722 and P3765), Mason being slightly wounded and Patterson seriously injured. Turchi's fighter had also been hit, however, and he had to force-land his damaged biplane at Benina airfield. The pilot was awarded the Silver Medal for Military Valour following this action. The next day, six CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo* (one from 367ª and five from 368ª *Squadriglie*) strafed British vehicles near Mechili. Capitano Bruno Locatelli, CO of 368ª *Squadriglia*, was shot down by anti-aircraft fire during a strafing pass and was captured.

On 1 February 1941 eight CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo* (six from 366ª and two from 368ª *Squadriglie*) attacked two Hurricane Is of No 73 Sqn, flown by Sgts Marshall and Wills, that were strafing a convoy of Italian vehicles near Cyrene at 1730 hrs. In the ensuing combat, Sgt W C Wills (in V7544/TP-S) and Capitano Bernardino Serafini each clamed a kill. Serafini also stated that he had damaged another Hurricane I in conjunction with Sergente Maggiore Dino Carta. As it happened, neither side suffered any losses, although a 366ª *Squadriglia* CR.42 piloted by Sergente Rosario Di Carlo ran out of fuel and force-landed.

All through February British aircraft mounted relentless strafing attacks on Italian motor vehicle convoys retreating from the Derna area. On the 2nd ten Blenheim IVs of No 55 Sqn were intercepted near Maraua by seven CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo*. Two 366ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s flown by Tenente Mario Ferrero and Sergente Maggiore Fiorenzo Milella chased and damaged Flt Lt Smith's bomber, which

The British *Compass* offensive has ended and some of the last surviving CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo* are pictured in February 1941 dispersed among the palm trees at Sorman airstrip, Libya, after five hard months of operations *(AM)*

force-landed at Gazala. There was a particularly dramatic action two days later which started when two Blenheim Is of No 45 Sqn took off from Menastir to bomb the railway line ten miles southwest of Barce. They were attacked by two 368ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s flown by Sottotenente Furio Lauri and Sergente Maggiore Ezio Masenti, the former shooting Blenheim I L8538 down in flames. Crewmen Sgts H C T Holmans and C P Edwards were killed, but pilot Flt Lt J Paine bailed out and reached his base several weeks later, having been assisted by local tribesmen.

Shortly after this action Masenti's aircraft suffered engine trouble and he had to force-land at Barce airfield. As British troops were approaching the area, 151° *Gruppo* mounted an operation to pick him up. The rescue mission involved four 366ª *Squadriglia* aircraft in the form of three CR.42s piloted by Capitano Chiarini, Maresciallo Giulio Cesare and Sergente Antonio Camerini, who escorted a Ca.133 transport flown by Maresciallo Giovanni Accorsi. Once over Barce the Italian formation was intercepted by a patrol of three low-flying Hurricane Is from No 73 Sqn, and Plt Off J B 'Chips' McColl (in V7372/TP-W) shot down the Caproni, while Plt Off G E Goodman (in V7716/TP-U) downed Chiarini, who had dived onto McColl's tail.

But the British patrol did not leave the scene unscathed, for in a head-on attack Camerini damaged Hurricane I V7491, flown by Plt Off Ken M 'Tiny' Millist, so badly that it had to be force-landed ten miles northeast of Benina. He managed to rejoin his unit at Derna on foot three days later, having evaded enemy troops. Both Accorsi and five-victory ace Chiarini were killed, and they were posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour.

On 12 February the last 12 airworthy CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo* were pulled out of the frontline and sent west to Sorman airfield, on the Libyan coast. Here, the unit was placed under the command of Tenente Colonello Raffaele Colacicchi, who had taken over from Maggiore Calosso in December when the latter stood down due to ill health. The three *squadriglie* commanders were Capitano Bernardino Serafini (366ª), Capitano Simeone Marsan (367ª) and Tenente Giuseppe Zuffi (368ª).

Left
Maresciallo Giovanni Accorsi of 366ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo* was killed on 4 February 1941 while attempting to rescue a downed Italian pilot. Flying a Ca.133, he was shot down near Barce by Plt Off J B 'Chips' McColl of No 73 Sqn. Aged 23, Accorsi was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour (*AM*)

Far left
Capitano Guglielmo Chiarini of 151° *Gruppo's* 366ª *Squadriglia* was shot down and killed by Plt Off G E Goodman of No 73 Sqn near Barce on 4 February 1941. Chiarini was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour. He had been credited with at least five confirmed kills in North Africa (*AM*)

The 151° *Gruppo's* first operational tour in Libya finally ended on 31 July, the unit having been kept out of much of the fighting since mid-February due to a chronic lack of aircraft. Nevertheless, despite having a reduced number of fighters, the *gruppo* still occasionally managed to make its presence felt. For example, on 2 May a pair of CR.42s flown by Sergente Arturo Imberti and Tenente Amedeo Guidi of 366ª *Squadriglia* claimed to have attacked three Blenheims. Imberti reported that he had shot one of them down, and No 55 Sqn records show that Blenheim I L8398 was struck off charge on this date for reasons unknown.

During the late afternoon of 29 June five Blenheim IVs bombed and strafed Sorman airfield, where they destroyed three CR.42s (one from 368ª *Squadriglia* and two from 366ª *Squadriglia*), as well as the Ca.133 'hack' of the latter unit. Seven other CR.42s of 366ª *Squadriglia* were damaged by bomb splinters and two groundcrew from 368ª and 376ª *Squadriglie* were wounded.

Some redress was gained on 9 July when seven No 110 Sqn Blenheim IVs from Luqa airfield, on Malta, attacked Axis shipping in Tripoli harbour. They were intercepted by a G.50 of 155° *Gruppo*, flown by Sergente Maggiore Aldo Buvoli, and two CR.42s from 151° *Gruppo*, flown by Maresciallo Paolo Montanari of 366ª *Squadriglia* and Sergente Ottorino Ambrosi of 368ª *Squadriglia*. Four Blenheim IVs were shot down, with Montanari and Ambrosi claiming one apiece. Ambrosi was later awarded the Bronze Medal for Military Valour.

On the 18th two 368ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s flown by Tenente Armando Capogrossi and Sergente Audibert intercepted two Blenheim IVs of No 110 Sqn off Tripoli. Capogrossi shot down Z9582 (flown by Wg Cdr T M Hunt), the bomber crashing into the sea in flames, killing all on board. Capogrossi also claimed to have damaged the other raider. Four days later Sergente Maggiore Vincenzo Graffeo

Four members of 151° *Gruppo Autonomo CT* are pictured in Libya in 1941. They are, from left to right, Sergenti Antonio Camerini (shot down on 31 March 1943 and captured), Ernesto De Bellis, Stefano Fiore and Ottorino Ambrosi (*De Bellis/Ala Tricolore*)

of 367ª *Squadriglia* chased a lone No 110 Sqn Blenheim IV reconnaissance aircraft over Tripoli harbour and damaged it. The aircraft made it back to Malta despite the wounds suffered by its pilot, Sgt L Ware. Fellow crewman Sgt W Sargent later died of his wounds, but Sgt R Lofthouse was unhurt.

As a result of 151° *Gruppo's* first North African operational tour, 53° *Stormo* was awarded its second Silver Medal for Military Valour. Several of the unit's pilots had been killed, one of whom, Capitano Guglielmo Chiarini, would ultimately be immortalised by the association of his surname with 53° *Stormo* from 15 October 1971. Once back in Italy, 151° *Gruppo* was deployed to Treviso airfield, where it flew CR.42s and C.200s.

After a short spell in Sardinia, the unit was ordered back to Africa on 18 November 1941, reaching Agedabia airfield on the 25th. The next day, four 366ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s engaged two Hurricane Is of No 33 Sqn over Augila. Capitano Bernardino Serafini and Sergente Maggiore Camerini claimed to have jointly shot down the fighter flown by Flg Off D S F Winsland. The other Hurricane I, piloted by Flg Off Cloete, was driven off by Tenente Amedeo Guidi and Maresciallo Paolo Montanari. Winsland's aircraft may well have been the last Hurricane I to be shot down by a CR.42, but it certainly represented the first kill of 151° *Gruppo's* second North African tour. More than four decades later, in 1984, the two former enemies Camerini and Winsland would meet again and become friends.

From 26 November RAF fighters began to make frequent strafing attacks on Agedabia, causing significant losses of 151° *Gruppo* aircraft. At 1230 hrs that day six Beaufighter ICs of No 272 Sqn attacked the airfield, destroying single CR.42s from 366ª and 367ª *Squadriglie* and badly damaging an SM.81 and a second CR.42 from 366ª *Squadriglia*. Among *gruppo* flying personnel, Sergente Maggiore Pasquale Di Cerbo of 366ª *Squadriglia* was wounded. The raiders also claimed to have shot down a Ca.311, but Sottotenente Giuseppe Cantù of 375ª *Squadriglia*, 160° *Gruppo* downed the Beaufighter IC of Sgts Price (pilot) and Southern (navigator). The RAF fighters were back at 1605 hrs the next day, and this time it was the turn of No 73 Sqn's Hurricane Is to make a series of low-level attacks. Again, a 367ª *Squadriglia* Fiat fighter was destroyed and a second machine badly damaged. They also shot up a lone SM.81.

The most lethal attacks on Agedabia came on 2 December when No 33 Sqn Hurricane Is visited the airfield at 1005 hrs and again at 1600 hrs. In the first attack Flg Off Charles damaged two 366ª and two 367ª *Squadriglie* machines. Worse still, groundcrews were surprised as they serviced aircraft in the open, 367ª *Squadriglia* losing three killed and having two more badly wounded. Two 366ª *Squadriglia* personnel were also wounded. During the second attack, carried out by six Hurricane Is, Sgt Challis flew so low that his wingtip hit a CR.42. The Italians reported that one 367ª *Squadriglia* machine was set on fire (MM7634, which had been damaged in the morning) and two other Fiats of 366ª *Squadriglia* badly damaged.

There were yet further attacks on Agedabia by No 33 Sqn on 5 and 8 December. In the first, six Hurricane Is, with two others flying top cover, destroyed two CR.42s of 366ª *Squadriglia*. Plt Off L Wade also finished off the SM.81. In addition, four more CR.42s from 366ª *Squadriglia* and one Ca.311 were badly damaged. However, No 33 Sqn did not escape unscathed, as two Hurricane Is were lost, although their pilots, Plt Off Wade and Sgt Wooler, were rescued the next day by a Blenheim. Three days later four Hurricane Is attacked the airfield between 0700-0715 hrs. This time they caused modest damage to a pair of 367ª *Squadriglia* CR.42s, but the Hurricane I flown by Flg Off Charles was hit by flak and he force-landed east of the airfield. He was rescued by Flt Lt Gould, who landed and picked up the downed pilot. Altogether, both attacks had cost 151° *Gruppo* two CR.42s and one SM.81 destroyed, together with six more CR.42s damaged, while No 33 Sqn had lost three Hurricane Is, all of whose pilots were saved.

But such losses were not just inflicted in aerial attacks. On the night of 21/22 December the Special Air Service (SAS) and Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), operating in a 'raiding partnership', were able to penetrate the airfield's defences and cause further damage. Five SAS raiders led by Lt Bill Fraser destroyed a staggering 37 Axis aircraft. Of this total 25 were Italian, including nine CR.42s of 151° *Gruppo Autonomo* – six from 368ª *Squadriglia* and three from 367ª *Squadriglia*. As a consequence of this attack, on 22 December AOC *Settore Aeronautico Centrale* (Air Force Central Sector) ordered 151° *Gruppo* to move from Agedabia to Arae Philenorum (nicknamed 'Marble Arch' by the British). The *gruppo* had in fact started its move to 'Marble Arch' two days prior to the SAS raid, with 366ª *Squadriglia* transferring three CR.42s to the new airfield on the 20th and four more on the 21st.

On 24 December 1941, two days after the devastating SAS raid, 151° *Gruppo*, still equipped with CR.42s, was ordered back to Italy. At Caselle it would be reorganised and returned to 53° *Stormo* control, losing its autonomous status. Before its departure from Sorman airfield the unit handed over its last serviceable CR.42s to 160° *Gruppo*. There were just four of them.

OUT OF AFRICA

Eleven C.200s of 153° *Gruppo's* 374ª *Squadriglia* landed at Castel Benito airfield on 19 April 1941 to begin combat duties in North Africa with the new monoplane fighter. It was the first unit in the theatre to operate the Macchi monoplane, and pilots were initially employed on air defence duties and covering Axis naval convoys bound for Libya.

The remaining two *Asso di Bastoni squadriglie*, with a total of 25 C.200s between them, remained in Apulia, and during their time there flew 88 operational sorties totalling 140 flying hours. They generated 24 sorties covering Italian troops landing on Corfu, as well as nine escorting Axis shipping. The remaining 55 were mundane patrols of Taranto harbour. On 22 May the units were ordered to Rome-Ciampino South airport, where they fitted tropical sand filters to their Macchis for service from North African airfields. On 2 July 153° *Gruppo* HQ, together with 372ª and 373ª *Squadriglie*, left Ciampino South for Derna airfield to relieve 2° *Gruppo* CT, which was awaiting repatriation. After stopovers at Reggio Calabria, Palermo, Pantelleria, Castel Benito, Misurata, Benghazi and Wadi Tamet, the units' aircraft reached Derna on the 11th and 12th.

Three days latter they were joined by eight aircraft from 374ª *Squadriglia*, which flew in from K3 airfield at Berka. Since arriving in Libya the *squadriglia* had been kept busy mounting patrols over Tripoli and Benghazi harbours. During this period the unit flew 413 sorties totalling 654 flying hours, 282 from Castel Benito and the remaining 372 from K3, covering Axis naval convoys bound for Libya and Italian troops moving to the frontline. The only contact it had with enemy aircraft, however, was an attempted interception of a Blenheim reconnaissance aircraft which fled at such speed that it left the Macchi fighters trailing in its wake.

C.200s of 153° *Gruppo* pictured at Reggio Calabria airport in transit to North Africa in early July 1941. They reached Derna, Libya, on the 12th of that month (*AM*)

These five 'Ace of Clubs' pilots relax in hot summer sun during a stopover at Wadi Tamet airfield on their way to Derna in July 1941 (*AM*)

Following their arrival at Derna the *Asso di Bastoni gruppo* patrolled Axis bases and roads of strategic importance. The unit also provided aircraft on readiness at Derna, Barce and Gambut, but there was no contact with enemy aircraft despite the large number of sorties flown. Two 372ª *Squadriglia* pilots were, however, killed in flying accidents – Tenente Piero Arangino on 6 July and Sottotenente Giulio Binetti on the 29th. There was some operational activity on 15 July when eight 153° *Gruppo* C.200s escorted 11 Ju 87s (five from 239ª *Squadriglia*, led by Italian dive-bomber ace Capitano Giuseppe Cenni) in an attack on Allied shipping. The Italo-German Stukas were unsuccessful and the British landing craft LCT-10 and LCT-11 succeeded in sailing from Mersa Matruh unscathed.

There was another close escort mission on 2 August when, at 1815 hrs, 12 C.200s of 372ª and 373ª *Squadriglie*, together with 20 Bf 109Fs of I./JG 27, escorted 17 Ju 87s from 209ª *Squadriglia* and the Luftwaffe's I./StG 1. The Axis dive-bombers were again unsuccessful in their attack on Allied shipping northwest of Sidi Barrani, their dives being interrupted by Hurricane Is of No 1 Sqn SAAF. Two South African pilots, Capts M S Osler and C A van Vliet, shot down two

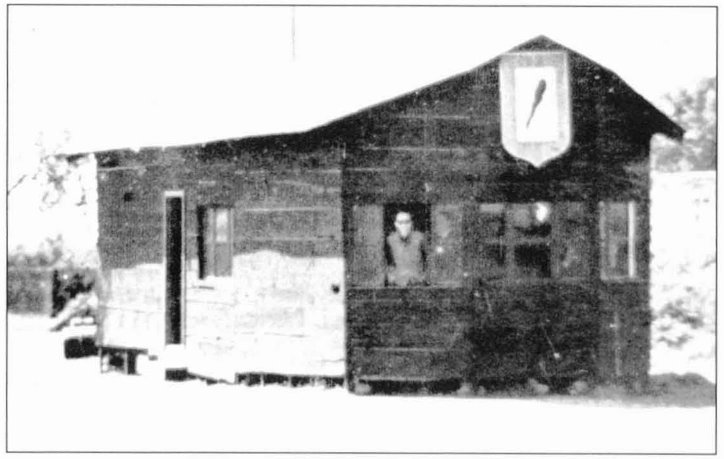
Another photograph of 'Ace of Clubs' pilots out of the cockpit, this time at Benghazi, their last stopover on the long journey to Derna in July 1941 (*AM*)

Two *Asso di Bastoni* fighter pilots sit in front of the sandbag-protected HQ tent of 373ª *Squadriglia* at Derna airfield during the summer of 1941 (*AM*)

German Stukas, killing Oberleutnant Wagner and Gefreiter Walz, together with their gunners. However, the SAAF unit lost three Hurricane Is flown by Lts Tatham and Tennant, who were both killed, while Lt Ruffel was captured. German fighter pilots were responsible for these losses, although the C.200 pilots fired at seven other Hurricane Is.

On 10 August 19 C.200s escorted 21 Ju 87s (six from 209ª *Squadriglia*) in a raid on Tobruk harbour. One oiler was claimed to have been struck, but two Italian Stukas were seriously damaged by anti-aircraft fire. On the 27th the perimeter of the Tobruk stronghold was the target for 57 Ju 87s (seven of them Italian) escorted by ten Macchis of 153° *Gruppo's* 373ª and 374ª *Squadriglie*. A machine from the latter unit, piloted by Tenente Nannipieri, was hit by the intense anti-aircraft fire during the attack dive and was later forced to make an emergency landing at Ain el Gazala. Further close escort sorties over Tobruk were performed on 1 September when 22 C.200s of 153° *Gruppo* covered Stukas from 209ª *Squadriglia* (eight aircraft) and I./StG 1.

Pilots of 153° *Gruppo's* 373ª *Squadriglia* pose for the camera in their standard Marus flying suits at Derna in 1941 (*AM*)



The 'Ace of Clubs' mess hut at Derna airfield in the summer of 1941 (*AM*)

The 153° *Gruppo* C.200s also flew ground attack missions, and on 7 September their target was the advanced desert airstrips around Sidi Barrani from which Tomahawks of No 2 Sqn SAAF were operating, together with the Hurricanes of No 1 Sqn SAAF and No 33 Sqn RAF. The first elements of the Italian attack formation took off at 0550 hrs and headed east, the 22 C.200s, accompanied by 15 G.50s of 155° *Gruppo,* commencing their attacks at 0745 hrs. They made several strafing passes, expending all of their ammunition on British aircraft parked along the edge of the airstrip, while the G.50s strafed two dirt runways. Altogether, the Italian attacks set fire to seven Tomahawks and eight Hurricanes. Despite the fierce anti-aircraft fire all the Italian aircraft made it back to base, although two C.200s and one G.50 had been hit by flak.

The day's devastation had actually been started by the Luftwaffe, whose Bf 109s attacked the No 33 Sqn and Fleet Air Arm airstrips at 0530 hrs. They left one Hurricane I burning and six others damaged. Only two Hurricane Is managed to get airborne in an unsuccessful interception attempt. It had been a black day for the Western Desert Air Force, with a total of 22 fighters destroyed or damaged. But the lesson had been learned and the Allies withdrew to safer airfields at Sidi Hameish, out of range of enemy aircraft.

On 14 September, 18 *Asso di Bastoni* C.200s took off at 1645 hrs to intercept a formation of enemy aircraft, later identified as Tomahawks, over Bir Habata. During the ensuing dogfight, the Macchi pilots claimed to have shot down three enemy aircraft for the loss of the 374ª *Squadriglia* C.200 flown by Capitano Egeo Pittoni. Seriously wounded by enemy fire, Pittoni was forced to land and receive treatment at a German field hospital. Later, he was flown to Derna hospital. It is likely that the British fighters involved in the encounter were actually Hurricane Is of No 33 Sqn that were escorting Maryland bombers of No 24 Sqn SAAF sent to bomb Axis tanks at 1730 hrs.

During the combat with Axis fighters (reported to be 12 Bf 109s and six 'G.50s') No 33 Sqn's Sgt Stroud claimed to have shot down a 'G.50'. This was probably Pittoni's aircraft. The loss of three Hurricane Is was attributed – as was customary – to the Luftwaffe's JG 27, specifically Oberleutnant Homuth and Leutnants Marseille and Hoffmann.

Throughout the month of October the Italian fighter pilots frequently escorted photo-reconnaissance SM.79s, as well as carrying out readiness duties and reconnaissance missions of their own over British ground forces following the fitment of cameras to the C.200s of 153° *Gruppo*. For example, on the 3rd a pair of Macchis from 374ª *Squadriglia* overflew the Tobruk stronghold. A similar mission over Sidi Barrani on 16 October ended badly, however, when two Macchis from the same unit collided and crashed, killing both pilots (Tenente Albino Gizzi and Maresciallo Riccardo Tamanini).

November also opened dramatically when, on the 1st, a C.200 flown by Sergente Maggiore Giovanni Tonello attacked a formation of nine Maryland bombers of No 21 Sqn SAAF whilst patrolling over Derna airfield. Three of the aircraft were damaged before the Italian pilot was wounded by return fire. Tonello made a forced-landing near Bir Temrad and was taken to the field hospital of the Italian *Trieste* Motorised Division.

On 4 November another 153° *Gruppo* Macchi, flown by Tenente Italo Palli of 372ª *Squadriglia*, was scrambled and pursued an enemy reconnaissance aircraft that was probably a No 223 Sqn Maryland, whose pilot reported being attacked by an 'ME 109F'. The Macchi managed to close with the Maryland and Palli claimed to have shot it down before running out of fuel and making an emergency landing south of Tmimi. Its pilot was unhurt and he duly returned to his unit, whilst his aircraft was recovered a short while later.

There was another attack on Derna on the 7th when six Marylands of No 21 Sqn SAAF raided the 153° *Gruppo* airfield. Two C.200s of 372ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Sottotenente Mario Peselli and Maresciallo Marino Mariani, were scrambled and intercepted the bombers at 13,000 ft over the airfield. Return fire from the lead bomber hit Mariani's aircraft when gunner Sgt Tucker poured three long bursts into it. The Macchi pilot perished trying to bail out of his stricken machine, which crashed near the airfield. His loss was immediately avenged by Peselli, who pursued the bombers and shot down the Maryland flown by Capt G W Parsons. Two of its crew were killed and two captured. Earlier that same day a another six-strong Maryland formation had been intercepted by two patrolling Macchis flown by Capitano Natale Veronesi and Tenente Bruno Zavadlal, but the bombers escaped.

The pilots of 153° *Gruppo* again clashed with the SAAF on the 15th when five C.200s escorted an SM.79 bomber on a reconnaissance mission over Bir Kamsa. The Italian formation was intercepted by two Hurricane Is of No 1 Sqn SAAF flown by Capt M S Osler and 2Lt Seccombe. Having been warned of the aircrafts' presence by radar, the Allied pilots had been able to get into position 'up sun' before engaging the Italian aircraft. In an effort to protect their charge, the escorting Macchi pilots immediately engaged the SAAF fighters. Osler quickly set Sergente Aldo Villa's C.200 alight and Seccombe finished it off, although the Italian managed to bail out safely.

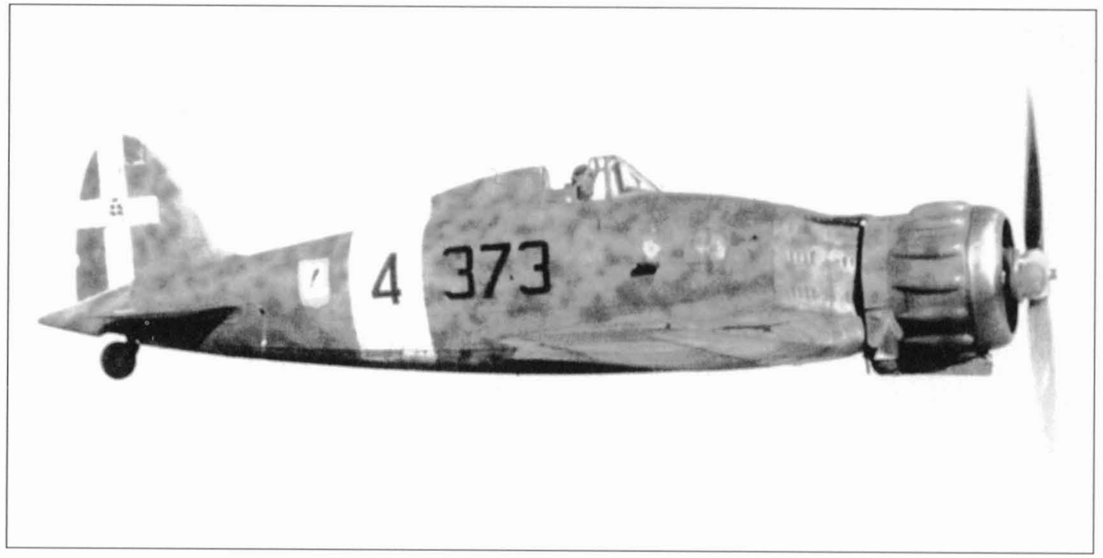
CRUSADER LAUNCHED

The Allies launched their Operation *Crusader* offensive on 18 November, attacking Axis forces deep inside Libya. Like other *Regia Aeronautica* and Luftwaffe units, the *Asso di Bastoni Gruppo* found itself embroiled in the battle virtually from the start.

On 20 November eight Macchis of 153° *Gruppo* and three G.50s of 155° *Gruppo* were flying an armed reconnaissance mission when they attacked British vehicles at Bir el Gobi. As soon as the Italian aircraft appeared overhead, an intense anti-aircraft barrage erupted from the ground. Five C.200s and a G.50 were hit and one of the Macchis and the Fiat had to make forced-landings. There was another loss for the 'Ace of Clubs' the following day when, during an afternoon mission, three C.200s led by Capitano Piero Raimondi (CO of 373ª *Squadriglia*) encountered 12 Tomahawks of No 2 Sqn SAAF. The latter were flying top cover for ten aircraft of No 4 Sqn SAAF that were conducting a strafing mission between Bir el Gobi and Sidi Rezegh.

The top cover Tomahawks immediately attacked the three Macchis, and during the dogfight Lt E C 'Danny' Saville in Tomahawk IIB AN311/TA-C manoeuvred so closely to a Macchi that he hit it with his starboard wing. The Italian fell away and Saville had to use all his skill to get his aircraft back to El Adem with a badly buckled wingtip. Although the stricken Macchi was not seen to crash, Saville was credited with a probable kill. The Italians reported that Capitano Raimondi had failed to return to his base. However, before the collision South African pilot Lt Stone claimed to have shot down a Macchi. It is unclear, therefore, who had downed Raimondi's C.200.

The *Asso di Bastoni* also claimed some kills on this day after three pilots from 373ª *Squadriglia* bounced two Hurricanes between Sidi Omar and Bir Kamsa. The Macchi pilots subsequently reported that



C.200 373-4 of 153° *Gruppo's* 373ª *Squadriglia* undertakes a patrol over the Libyan desert shortly after the unit's arrival in theatre (*AM*)

they had definitely shot down both aircraft. The RAF admitted the loss of a Hurricane I flown by Sgt Stammers of No 33 Sqn. Another one, from No 451 Sqn and flown by Lt Smith, crashed in flames while flying a tactical reconnaissance sortie.

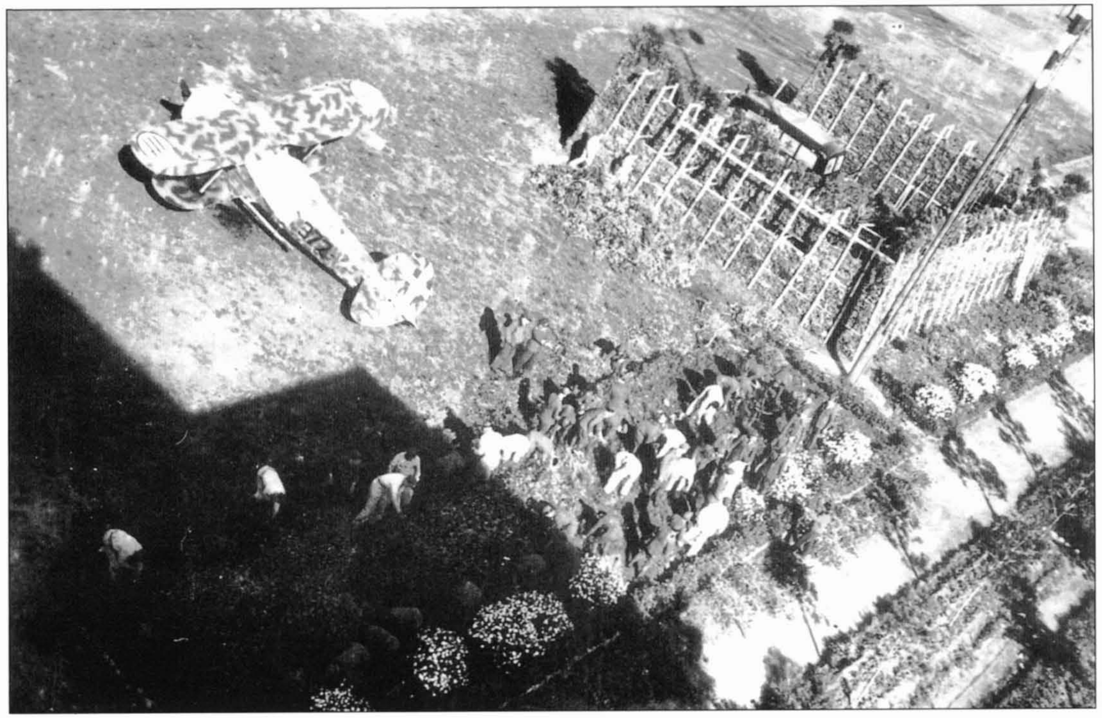
On 22 November, during an armed reconnaissance sweep between Sidi Omar and Capuzzo, five C.200s encountered two Hurricane Is that were conducting a similar mission. The Italians attacked them at a height of 2600 ft some three miles east of Gasr el Arid, and they claimed to have shot both aircraft down – one was reportedly seen to crash, while the other was left descending in flames. The British reported that two No 237 Sqn Hurricane Is flown by Flt Lt Hutchinson and Flg Off Olver were flying a reconnaissance sortie over the Capuzzo-Gambut area when they were bounced. Hutchinson was shot down by C.200s (clearly from 153° *Gruppo*) and bailed out. That same day the squadron's Flg Off C L Sindall, who was attached to No 208 Sqn, failed to return from a mission over Tobruk.

During the afternoon of the 22nd, five C.200s from 153° *Gruppo* that were on a reconnaissance mission over Bir el Gobi intercepted two Wellingtons and continued firing at them until they ran out of ammunition. Both aircraft escaped by diving into nearby cloud cover, but not before their return fire had hit two Macchis, slightly wounding one pilot who nevertheless managed to return to base.

In the final action of busy day, 16 Macchis took off to provide air cover for Axis lines of communication. One of the 153° *Gruppo* C.200s crashed during the course of the mission, killing 372ª *Squadriglia* pilot Tenente Italo Palli.

Between 0725 hrs and 0940 hrs on 23 November, five C.200s took off to escort a photo-reconnaissance SM.79 in the Bir Hakeim-El Cuasc and Bir el Gobi areas. North of El Cuasc the Macchis intercepted a Hurricane I that was quickly downed. Nos 229 and 238 Sqns reported losing two and five Hurricanes respectively in combat.

Groundcrew of 153° *Gruppo Autonomo* build a blast pen for a CR.42 of 372ª *Squadriglia* in North Africa in 1941 (*AM*)



There were many sorties for the Macchis the following day. While patrolling over Derna six pilots spotted an enemy reconnaissance aircraft that escaped into the clouds after the first Italian attack. Later, 21 *Asso di Bastoni* C.200s covered Axis lines of communication, while another two from 373ª *Squadriglia* flew a sweep over the *Ariete* Armoured Division as it moved from the Bir el Gobi area. Twelve C.200s escorted a similar number of G.50s from 20° *Gruppo* tasked with attacks in the El Adem-Sidi Rezegh-Bir el Gobi area, with ten Bf 109s from JG 27 also providing support. Later in the morning another direct escort mission was performed by 12 C.200s and 11 G.50s of 20° *Gruppo* as cover for 18 Bf 110s of III./ZG 26 that were making further attacks in the El Adem-Sidi Rezegh-Bir el Gobi area.

In the afternoon two Macchis of 153° *Gruppo* escorted four G.50s from 20° *Gruppo* that were tasked with conducting strafing attacks east of Bir el Gobi, but this action was hampered by Allied fighters operating in the same sector. The day ended for 153° *Gruppo* with attacks by seven C.200s on enemy vehicles south of Mechili, as well as an escort mission by five *Saettas* and ten 155° *Gruppo* G.50s for 17 Bf 110s of III./ZG 26 that had been ordered to make strafing attacks in the El Cuasc area.

Between 25 and 27 November, 153° *Gruppo* aircraft performed 87 sorties, mainly escorting (together with 20° and 155° *Gruppi* G.50s) formations of Ju 87 Stukas targeting the Bir el Gobi, Sidi Omar, Capuzzo and Gambut sectors. They also patrolled Derna harbour and airfield.

After several days of intensive action poor weather called a halt to operations on the 28th. Yet the day was far from uneventful as the cloud cover did not stop the RAF. Raids on Derna resulted in a C.200 and a Ca.133 (both from 373ª *Squadriglia*) being slightly damaged by bomb splinters. The weather improved the next day when 153° *Gruppo* flew two escort missions. The first, at 1015 hrs, saw four of eight *Asso di Bastoni* C.200s intercepted southeast of El Adem by eight Hurricane IIs of No 229 Sqn and ten from No 238 Sqn. Two C.200s were hit but returned to their base, Sergente Maggiore Elvio Saccani being slightly wounded. Sqn Ldr O'Neill and Sgt Pearson of No 238 Sqn each claimed a victory apiece, with the latter probably destroying a second fighter, while several pilots from No 229 Sqn were credited with damaging a third Italian aircraft.

The second escort mission of the day saw 13 Macchis protecting dive-bombers, while seven others strafed enemy vehicles on the roads between El Ezzeiat and Derna. The remaining three missions of 29 November were patrols over Derna aerodrome and Axis lines of communication, as well as the delivery of a key despatch to the German *Panzergruppe* deployed around El Adem.

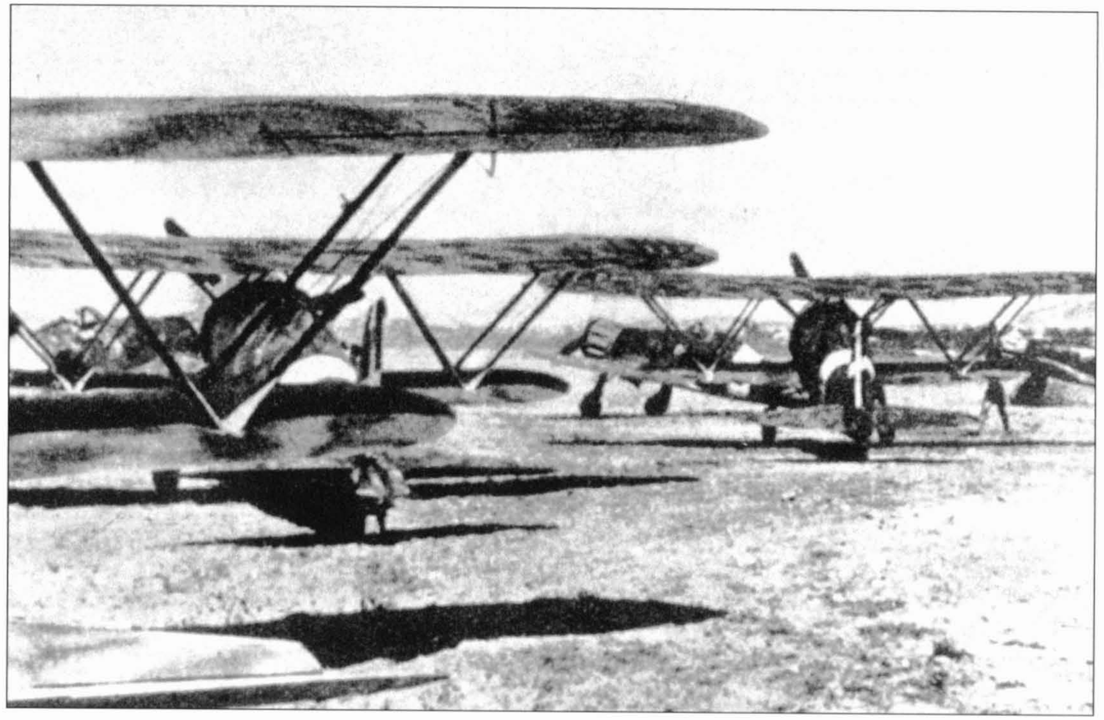
On 30 November six C.200s of 153° *Gruppo*, operating alongside G.50s of 155° and 20° *Gruppi*, escorted Ju 87s of II./StG 2. The Axis aircraft were attacked by Tomahawks of No 3 Sqn RAAF and the RAF's No 112 Sqn between Sidi Rezegh and Bir el Gobi. The Australians claimed 12 kills but lost two fighters, although both Sgt A C Cameron and Flt Lt W S Arthur were safe. The 'Shark' squadron claimed three for the loss of two Tomahawks, flown by Plt Offs Neville Bowker and Neville Duke. Both pilots returned to their unit the next day. 153° *Gruppo* claimed to have shot down one Tomahawk, with another probably shot down. Two Macchis were badly damaged, one being written off and the other reported as repairable. Two other C.200s were slightly damaged and a fifth, hit in the fuel tank, force-landed near Umm er Rzem. 374ª *Squadriglia* pilots Tenente Mario Muro and Maresciallo Egeo Pardi, returned to base slightly wounded.

There were more fierce air battles in December. On the 1st a 153° *Gruppo* Macchi flown by Sottotenente Renzo Sappa failed to return from a mission flown between 0800 hrs and 0950 hrs southeast of Bir el Gobi. Eight C.200s escorting Bf 110s were attacked by fighters identified as P-40s, two of which were fired on by the Macchi pilots. Twelve Tomahawks of No 250 Sqn and eight Fleet Air Arm Sea Hurricanes were flying in the area at 0815 hrs, the naval pilots claiming to have shot down three 'G.50s' plus one probable. Sub Lt Woods also claimed a 'G.50' as a probable, while No 250 Sqn's Plt Off Adams failed to return, although he was safely back with his unit the next day.

On the 4th ten 'Ace of Clubs' Macchis, together with six from 157° *Gruppo*, provided cover for a large formation of Italo-German Ju 87 Stukas east of Bir el Gobi. They encountered several Allied fighter units when the Axis formation was spotted by the Tomahawks of No 2 Sqn SAAF, led by Capt I J Robbertse. Further fighters from Nos 112 'Shark' and 250 Sqns quickly joined in the general melee, and pilots from the former unit claimed to have downed four Italian fighters (three G.50s and a C.200). These were credited to Flt Lt D F 'Jerry' Westenra (two G.50s) and Plt Offs Neville Bowker (one G.50) and Neville Duke (the C.200). Duke reported that the Macchi finally hit the ground after a long dogfight at low level.

Capt Robbertse also claimed to have probably destroyed a G.50, but squadronmate Lt J F R Dodson collided head-on with a second Fiat. The Italian aircraft was reported to have crashed, while Dodson failed to return. South African records also note that Lt D V D Lacey had been hit by a C.200 after shooting down two Stukas. As it happened, 153° *Gruppo* reported only four C.200s damaged and one pilot (Tenente Felice Mezzetti) wounded, the latter suffering injuries to his right heel. All returned to Derna. However, 157° *Gruppo* suffered more serious losses, with two C.200s destroyed and Sottotenente Arrigo Zancristoforo of 384ª *Squadriglia* killed when he was shot down by Plt Off Duke. The pilots of the 11 G.50s from 20° *Gruppo* that escorted the Stukas over Gabr Saleh claimed to have shot down three Tomahawks and one Hurricane at a cost of a single Fiat fighter destroyed.

The next day 14 C.200s of 153° and 157° *Gruppi*, accompanied by 14 G.50s of 20° *Gruppo*, provided close escort for 40 Italian and German Stukas, including nine *Picchiatelli* of 239ª *Squadriglia*, that were sent to attack targets in the Taieb el Esem-Bir el Gobi area. Top cover was provided by high-flying Bf 109Fs of I. and II./JG 27. Fifteen miles south of El Adem the Axis formation encountered ten Tomahawks of No 112 Sqn and 12 more from No 250 Sqn, led by Sqn Ldr Clive R 'Killer' Caldwell. A fierce dogfight then ensued, after which the RAF pilots claimed 18 kills, four probables and six damaged. This total grossly exceeded actual Axis losses. Caldwell was credited with shooting down five Stukas, two of which were Italian-flown. A third Italian dive-bomber was severely damaged, being forced to land off the runway. Three other Italian Ju 87s were hit by anti-aircraft fire.



CR.42s and C.200s parked at Agedabia airfield in December 1941 during the British *Crusader* offensive. Both 151° and 153° *Gruppi* flew numerous strafing attacks against Allied troops in an attempt to hinder their advance westward (*AM*)

Among the day's other British top scorers, Sgt Bob Whittle of No 250 Sqn claimed to have accounted for two Ju 87s, with one more probably shot down. Plt Off Neville Bowker of No 112 Sqn damaged a G.50 and destroyed three Ju 87s, Plt Off Jack Bartle claimed a G.50 and a Ju 87, Flt Lt C F Ambrose claimed a G.50 and a C.200 as probables and Plt Off J P Sabourin reported shooting down a Bf 109 and a G.50, as well as damaging two Bf 109s and another G.50. In return, the RAF lost five Tomahawks, with Sgts Gilmour and Greenhow of No 250 Sqn being killed – the latter unit lost four aircraft in total. The fifth Tomahawk destroyed was AN337/GA-F of No 112 Sqn, flown by Neville Duke. Having been slightly wounded, he crash-landed his badly shot up fighter at Tobruk.

Despite the British claims, no Italian fighters were actually lost in this combat – indeed, they were credited with ten kills themselves. Several G.50s were hit and one pilot slightly wounded, and only one C.200 of 153° *Gruppo* was damaged. Having had the radiator of his fighter holed, the unnamed pilot had to make an emergency landing at Ain el Gazala.

Several Stuka escort sorties were flown east of Bir el Gobi on 7 December. The first was conducted between 1050 hrs and 1245 hrs

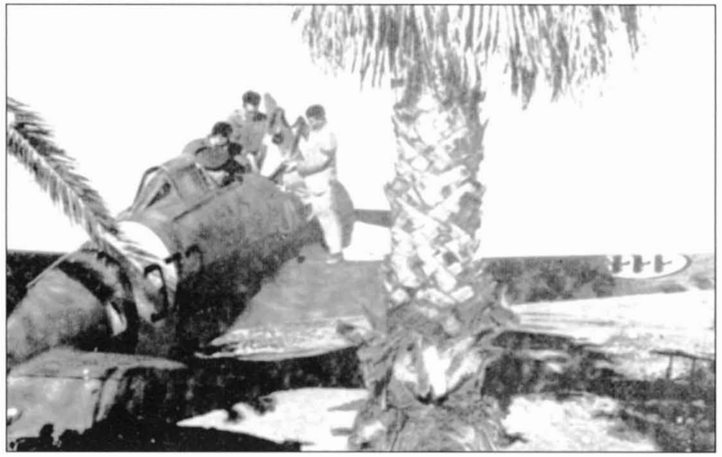
A C.200 of 153° *Gruppo's* 372ª *Squadriglia* is serviced among the palm trees on a Libyan landing ground in early 1942 (*Bundesarchiv*)

by ten C.200s of 153° *Gruppo*, but they were jumped at 1155 hrs by a large force of Commonwealth fighters. This combat lasted 20 minutes, and culminated in the Italians claiming six victories for the loss of three C.200s of 372ª *Squadriglia*. A fourth machine, flown by Tenente Cesare Marchesi, force-landed near Acroma and was written off. Although seriously damaged, the Macchi of Maresciallo Rocchetta reached Ain el Gazala safely. The three downed Italian pilots – Capitano Armando Farina, CO of 372ª *Squadriglia*, Sottotenente Guido Sturla and Sergente Maggiore Rino Lupetti – all failed to return.

Hurricane II-equipped No 1 Sqn SAAF lost two aircraft that day, with three more damaged, while No 274 Sqn lost three aircraft, all of which were reported to have been shot down by JG 27's Bf 109s. The pilots of 153° *Gruppo* flew a second mission on the 7th when seven Macchis took part in a dive-bombing attack on two Royal Navy cruisers off the Libyan coast. The day's final sortie was a patrol over Derna flown by a 373ª *Squadriglia Saetta*.

On 9 December nine Maryland bombers of No 21 Sqn SAAF returned to Derna and claimed to have hit aircraft parked on the airfield. They were intercepted by a CR.42 and a C.200 from 153° *Gruppo* that had been scrambled to catch the raiders. The two fighters made determined attacks on the bombers, one of which was holed by their bullets. There was heavy return fire and all nine top-turret gunners claimed to have hit a 'G-50', but neither Italian fighter was reported to have been damaged. Later that day the 'Ace of Clubs' Macchis and Fiats flew a total of 21 sorties in two missions as escorts for Ju 87s. In the first, six Macchis provided cover for an attack on motor vehicles west of Tobruk, while the second, carried out by ten *Saettas*, involved a surprise attack on vehicles – some of them armoured – near Bir el Gobi.

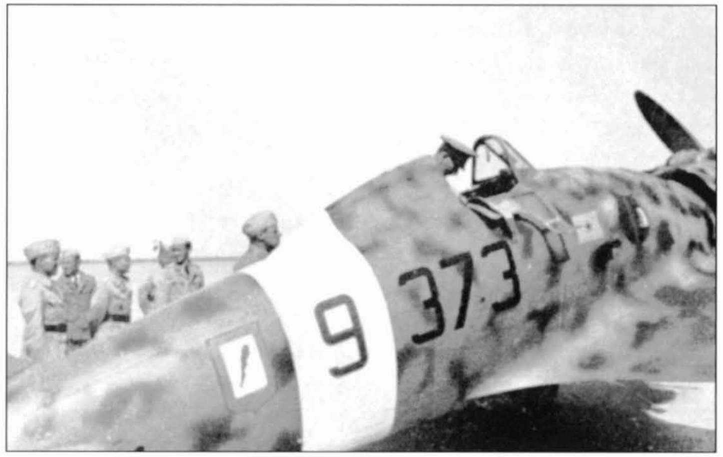
Five days later 153° *Gruppo* pilots flew 29 sorties, with 15 C.200s being despatched as escorts for Luftwaffe Stukas that were sent to attack enemy vehicles southeast of Ain el Gazala. A second operation covering German Ju 87s was flown by 12 *Saettas* over Gabr Saleh. On the 15th 153° *Gruppo* pilots completd a further 18 sorties, again providing cover for formations of Stukas. Ten Macchis were active in the sector southeast of Ain el Gazala, while the second mission saw seven C.200s operating southeast of El Mechili. On both occasions the German dive-bombers attacked enemy columns moving towards Derna. No contact was made with enemy aircraft during the final sortie of the day following a scramble.



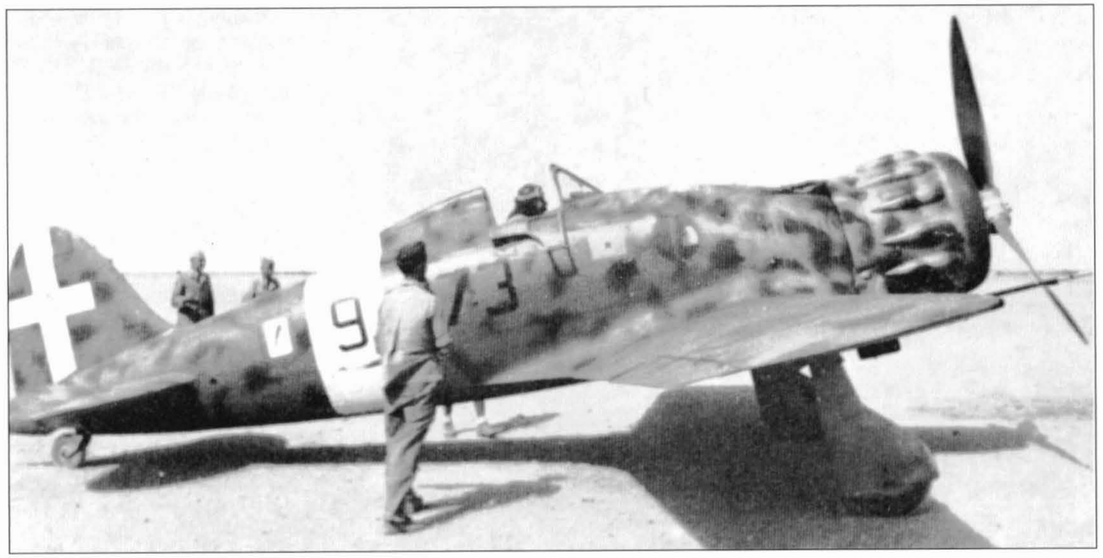
Another photograph of the same 372ª *Squadriglia* C.200 undergoing maintenance. This aircraft was an early-build C.200, as it boasted a sliding canopy (*Bundesarchiv*)

The success of the *Crusader* offensive forced the personnel of 153° *Gruppo* to withdraw from Derna to Sidi Magrum during the morning of 18 December, but a shortage of fuel restricted operations from the new airfield. Nevertheless, the *gruppo* was still able to fly 13 sorties that day, including an eight-strong C.200 escort for Italian Ju 87s attacking an enemy column moving towards Benghazi. In another mission three 373ª *Squadriglia* Macchis accompanied the dive-bombers over Umm er Rzem, deep within Cyrenaica. Two 374ª *Squadriglia* C.200s also undertook a reconnaissance mission in an effort to pinpoint enemy forces spotted in the El Mechili area.

Later that morning a pair of Ca.133 transports from 373ª *Squadriglia* took off from Derna to ferry groundcrew to Sidi Magrum. They were escorted by four C.200s, one of which had to make a wheels-up landing at Benghazi due to undercarriage failure. Nine more Macchis also flew to Sidi Magrum, but one was forced to land at Barce after its engine lost all of its oil. In the afternoon three *Saettas* provided air cover for Axis vehicles travelling between Maraua and Sidi Magrum.



Luftwaffe officers watch Generale di Brigata Aerea Ferdinando Raffaelli, AOC of 5ª *Squadra Aerea's* Eastern Sector, climbing into his personal C.200 373-9, its codes clearly showing that it has been 'borrowed' from 153° *Gruppo* (*Bundesarchiv*)



Another view of Generale di Brigata Aerea Raffaelli with his C.200 373-9. A groundcrewman is assisting him with final pre-flight checks. Raffaelli used this aircraft to make inspections of frontline units. Note the Generale di Brigata Aerea's command pennant, featuring a red star on a blue base, beneath the windscreen (*Bundesarchiv*)

The next day a single C.200 of 373ª *Squadriglia* patrolled the coastal road at Balbia, overflying the Barce-Sidi Magrum sector before landing at En Nofilia. On 20 December 1941 the Ca.133 'hack' of 153° *Gruppo*, ferrying some of the unit's groundcrews, was attacked by two Hurricane Is of No 33 Sqn flown by Sgts Challis and Kierath. The transport was hit and force-landed 17 miles southeast of Agedabia, the aircraft being put out of action when it was strafed by the Allied fighters. Its pilot, Tenente Mezzetti of 373ª *Squadriglia*, was slightly wounded, although the passengers were unhurt and later reached En Nofilia by road. The unit's move was completed on the 21st, although its stay lasted just 24 hours before the *squadriglia* left for Misurata.

After handing over its last airworthy C.200s to 8° *Gruppo* and the recently arrived 150° *Gruppo*, 153° *Gruppo* personnel were repatriated between 26 December 1941 and 2 January 1942. The unit was redeployed to Turin-Caselle, where, together with 151° *Gruppo*, the 'Ace of Clubs' would reactivate 53° *Stormo*, which had been disbanded in February 1941.

During its time in North Africa, 153° *Gruppo* had flown 3591 operational missions totalling 4686 flying hours. Its pilots had fought in 21 aerial combats and claimed 19 confirmed kills and 12 probables. They had also carried out several ground attack missions that had resulted in 25 Allied aircraft being destroyed. This figure included 19 Hurricanes and three Tomahawks.

LEGEND OF *GIGI TRE OSEI*

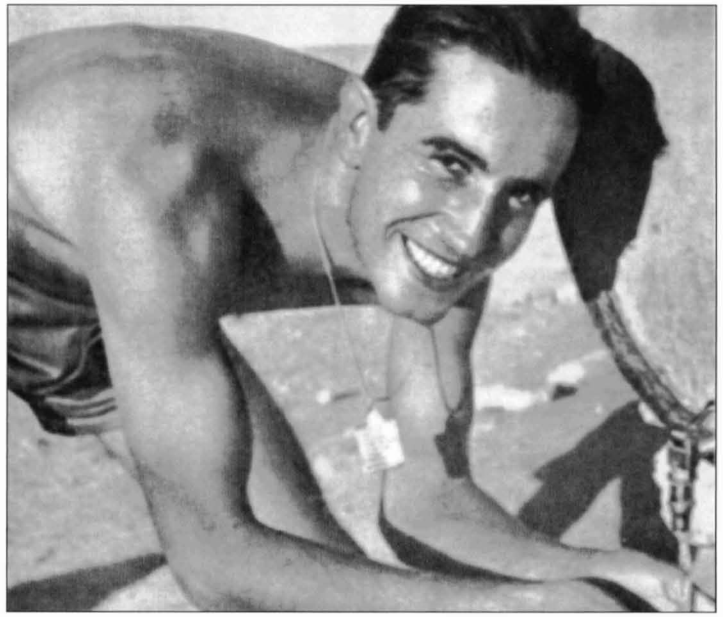
Tenente Luigi 'Gigi' Caneppele was a naturally gifted aviator. He was also a man whose generous nature made him one of the most popular 150° *Gruppo* pilots. A pre-war Olympic glider pilot, Caneppele wore the glider pilot's badge of three stylised birds on his white flying suit throughout his time in the frontline, earning him the nickname of *Gigi Tre Osei* ('Gigi Three Birds').

On 1 February 1942, while on a flight from Agedabia to Maraua aboard an SM.81 transport aircraft, Caneppele was killed when his aircraft crashed in a sandstorm near Benina. To preserve his memory one of his closest friends, Sottotenente Maurizio di Robilant, had a special badge painted on his Macchi fighter. It depicted a palm tree together with Caneppele's three birds, and featured the legend *Gigi Tre Osei*. From then on all 150° *Gruppo* aircraft would display this badge. They still do.

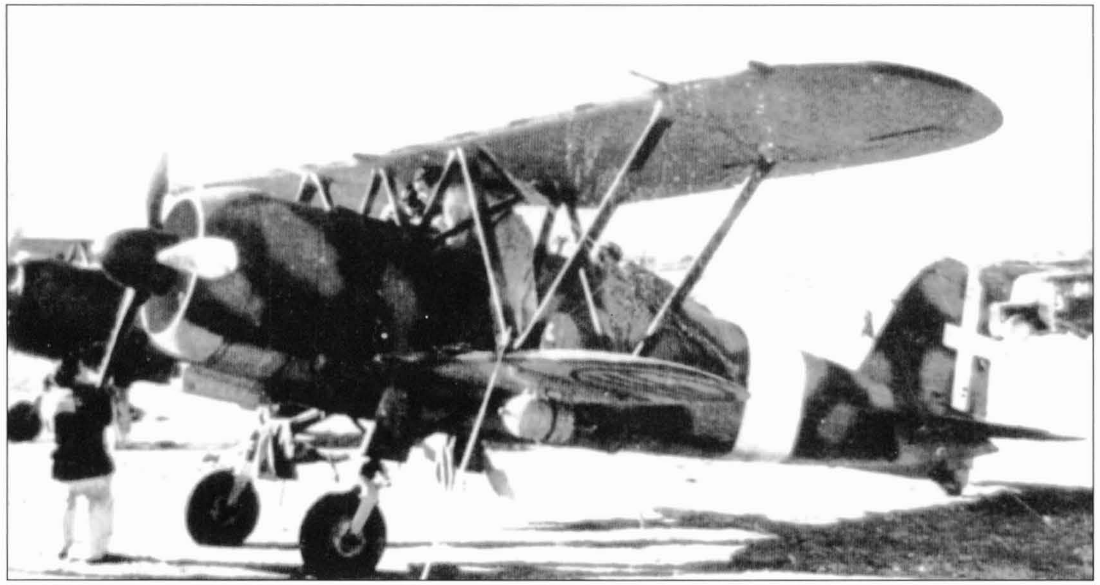
The unit had returned to North Africa in December 1941, and by the following month it had become fully operational. In January the *gruppo* flew 214 sorties totalling 354 flying hours. Of these sorties 157 were flown whilst escorting CR.42 fighter-bombers and both German and Italian Ju 87 dive-bombers. Another 24 sorties saw fighters patrolling over Axis lines of communication, 23 were flown in defence of the unit's airfield, eight were 'free chase' missions over the frontline and the remaining two were armed reconnaissance missions to hunt for enemy forces sighted in the area around Soluch, Agedabia and Msus.

On 8 January the unit's C.200s provided close escort for 21 CR.42 fighter-bombers of 3° *Gruppo Assalto* southeast of Agedabia. After the biplanes had claimed one Blenheim and two lorries destroyed on the ground, the Italian formation was jumped by Kittyhawks from No 3 Sqn RAAF. In the fierce dogfight that followed, 150° *Gruppo* Macchis shot down a Kittyhawk, killing Flg Off A R Baster, although two of the C.200s were also lost. They had fallen victim to Australian ace Sgt Ronald Simes, who would be killed the following day by Oberleutnant Gerhard Homuth of I./JG 27. The two downed Italian pilots, one of whom was wounded, managed to bail out safely, while six other C.200s made it back to base despite have sustained damage.

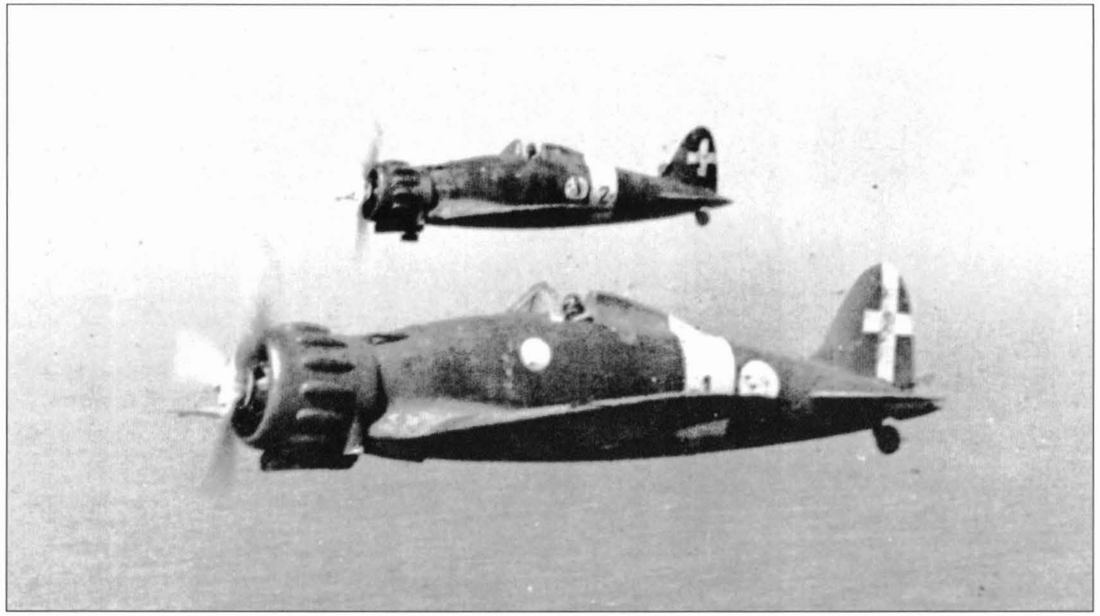
Several Macchis of 150° *Gruppo* provided close escort for 30 Ju 87s attacking 1st Armoured Division vehicle concentrations in the El Haseiat area on the 22nd. This placed the unit in conflict with No 3 Sqn RAAF once again when the formation was intercepted by 12 Kittyhawks. Flg Off R C Hart and Plt Off P R Giddy each claimed to have downed a



A cheerful Sottotenente Luigi Caneppele smiles for the camera. He was nicknamed '*Gigi Tre Osei*' ('Gigi Three Birds') by his squadronmates due to the glider pilot's badge (featuring three stylised birds) he proudly wore on his flying suit. A pre-war Olympic glider pilot of some fame, 'Gigi' was a natural born flyer with a generous nature, being very popular among 150° *Gruppo's* pilots. Initially assigned to 53° *Stormo* in 1939, at the outbreak of the war firstly he fought with 157° *Gruppo* and 2° *Stormo Caccia*, prior to being posted to 363ª *Squadriglia* of 150° *Gruppo*. This young pilot lost his life on 1 February 1942 when the SM.81 in which he was a passenger crashed in a sandstorm while flying from Agedabia to Maraua. Already decorated with a Silver Medal for Military Valour due to his North African service through December 1940, 'Gigi' received a second award of this Medal posthumously. Afterwards, one of his closest friends, Sottotenente Maurizio di Robilant, painted a new badge on his Macchi that also featured the motto 'Gigi Tre Osei'. The marking combined a desert palm with the three birds of 'Gigi's' glider badge. From then on, this emblem would be worn on all *gruppo* aircraft, becoming one of the most famous Italian Air Force unit badges of the conflict (*via author*)



The CR.42 was widely used by the Italians to make attacks on Allied troops in North Africa. This *Falco* fighter-bomber was photographed at Agedabia airfield about to take off with a load of bombs under the lower wings (*AM*)



Two *Gigi Tre Osei* C.200s pictured off the Libyan coast while escorting Axis shipping in early 1942 (*AM*)

C.200, while Flg Off 'Bobby' Gibbes reported shooting down a Ju 87 and damaging two Italian fighters. The 150° *Gruppo* pilots said that they had fired on four enemy fighters but lost Sergente Renato Carrari, who was posted as missing. Another Macchi was damaged by the Australian Kittyhawks and its pilot wounded, but the latter managed to return to base.

Two days later ten C.200s of 150° *Gruppo* flew close escort for seven CR.42 fighter-bombers and three Ju 87s attacking targets south of Msus. Top cover was provided by eight C.202 *Folgore* fighters. Once over the target area the Italo-German formation was intercepted by six Hurricane IIs of No 274 Sqn, the RAF pilots later reporting that they had met 30 Axis aircraft. In the ensuing battle the Italians claimed to have fired upon 11 enemy aircraft for no loss. Of No 274 Sqn's pilots, Sgt Dodds claimed to have shot down a CR.42 and a Ju 87, while Flt Lt Smith attacked two C.200s, claiming one destroyed and another damaged. Plt Off Moriarty reported shooting down a Ju 87 and a CR.42, with two other Stukas as probables. However, his aircraft was damaged and he crash-landed 15 miles west of Msus. Among the Stuka crews, one pilot of I./StG 3 was killed and another captured.

Following the recapture of Cyrenaica by Axis forces in January-February 1942, 150° *Gruppo* moved from El Merduma to Agedabia, then to K3 and, finally, on 12 February Martuba, where it deployed 23 C.200s alongside a photographic section. All these transfers were hampered by severe logistical difficulties and poor weather. And throughout this period the *gruppo* continued to lose some of its best pilots. For example, soon after the death of 'Gigi' Caneppele, Tenente Lorenzo Clerici was killed during an enemy bombardment on 4 February, while Sergente Teofilo Biolcati, a veteran of the Greek campaign, died in a flying accident on the 11th.

Yet between 12 and 28 February, the unit, now named *Gigi Tre Osei*, flew 108 sorties totalling 166 flying hours. Of this number 78 sorties were escort missions and 30 involved armed reconnaissance missions. During the latter, strafing attacks were often made on enemy forces, whose heavy calibre machine guns inflicted a heavy toll on the attacking Axis formations.

LOSSES

On the morning of 14 February seven C.202s of 6° *Gruppo* and 15 C.200s of 150° *Gruppo* were escorting seven CR.42 fighter-bombers from 3° *Gruppo* when they were attacked near Acroma by 18 Kittyhawks – ten from No 112 Sqn, led by Plt Off Jack Bartle, and eight from No 3 Sqn RAAF. This was to be the start of a bad day for the Italians. According to Allied reports, the subsequent dogfight turned into a one-sided slaughter

A 150° *Gruppo*, 363ª *Squadriglia* C.200 is seen here at Martuba airfield, Libya, in February 1942. Several *Gigi Tre Osei* airmen were lost in combat during that month (*AM*) of enemy aircraft. No few than 20 were claimed as destroyed, with two more listed as probables and ten damaged, all for no loss.

From the Italian perspective the truth was rather more prosaic, as the actual losses suffered by 150° *Gruppo* amounted to three Macchis, two of which fell to fighters and one to anti-aircraft fire. Three pilots failed to return, Tenente Armando Badessi, Sergente Bruno Dellai and Sottotenente Maurizio di Robilant, 'Gigi' Caneppele's friend. The *Saetta* of Sergente Maggiore Angeloni force-landed, the pilot later finding his way back to his unit. 6° *Gruppo* lost a C.202, while a CR.42 and another *Folgore* force-landed 15 miles north of Mechili and near Berta, respectively, their pilots being slightly wounded. Three more C.200s and a C.202 were damaged, but they managed to return to base. Tenente Ugo Drago of 363ª *Squadriglia* was able to shoot a Kittyhawk off the tail of Capitano Mariotti's C.200.

One of the day's top scorers on the Allied side was Flg Off Neville Duke who, flying Kittyhawk I AK578/GA-V, claimed to have shot down a C.200 and shared in the destruction of a second machine with Sgt F B Reid of No 3 Sqn RAAF. No 112 Sqn's Sgt Henry Burney, flying Tomahawk AK702, got a C.200 too, which he described as a 'Breda Ba.65', and Sgt R M Leu (in AK781) claimed two Macchis, while Plt Off Jack Bartle (in AK700) was credited with a Macchi shot down and a 'Me 109' damaged.

On the 23rd *Gigi Tre Osei* Macchis strafed a vehicle concentration near Sidi Muftah, but there was heavy anti-aircraft fire and seven Italian aircraft returned to base with varying levels of damage. One pilot was slightly wounded. The unit lost Sottotenente Mario Gambari to flak four days later when ten C.200s were providing close escort to Ju 87s attacking Tobruk harbour. On 28 February 15 C.200s led by 150° *Gruppo* CO Maggiore Antonio Vizzotto strafed El Adem airfield in an early morning raid. They were credited with destroying two enemy aircraft on the ground and damaging several others. On their return the Macchi pilots attacked Commonwealth vehicle concentrations, claiming to have set fire to ten vehicles and badly damaged 40 others.

Capitano Ugo Drago (centre) converses with his wingmen during his service with the *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana* (ANR). He was one of the war's leading Italian aces, being credited with a total of 17 kills, of which six were gained while serving with the *Regia Aeronautica* between 1940 and 1943. He achieved another 11 victories with the ANR in 1944-45 (*Nino Arena*)

Pilots of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* are seen here during a stopover on a North African airfield in early 1942. The first four pilots sitting facing the camera (from left to right) are Sottotenente Mario Gambari (killed in action on 27 February 1942), Sottotenente Fausto Filippi (eight-victory ace), Tenente Alberto Spigaglia and Tenente Ugo Drago (17-kill ace) (*via author*)

March saw Italian ground forces positioned around the Ain el Gazala sector, with Axis air forces employed on interdiction missions searching and attacking concentrations of Commonwealth vehicles and troops moving around the frontline. They also hit lines of supply to the besieged fortress of Tobruk. During this period, *Gigi Tre Osei* flew 122 sorties totalling 212 hours. The mission tally consisted of 33 sorties escorting bombers, 59 sorties on armed reconnaissance missions and 30 sweeps over Tobruk.

During the month 150° *Gruppo* pilots engaged in just two aerial combats, with the action on 8 March resulting in serious Italian losses. Ten C.200s, led by 363ª *Squadriglia* CO Capitano Luigi Mariotti, were providing close escort for 12 German Stukas in an attack on Tobruk harbour at 1630 hrs when they were attacked by 12 Kittyhawks (six each from Nos 450 and 3 Sqns RAAF) led by Flt Lt 'Nicky' Barr. German Bf 109s were flying top cover, but for unknown reasons they did not intervene. Five *Gigi Tre Osei* pilots – Tenente Enea Atti, Sergente Maggiores Enrico Micheli and Leopoldo Jerai and Sergenti Raffaele Badalassi and Ugo Rodorigo – were killed. Two badly damaged Macchis, one of them piloted by Tenente Ugo Drago, managed to land safely at Tmimi and Martuba.

Flt Lt 'Nicky' Barr, flying Kittyhawk AK903/CV-L, had scored his ninth kill during this action when he accounted for a Macchi northwest of Tobruk, with another claimed as a probable and two more damaged. Plt Off V F Curtis, Flg Off H G Pace and Plt Off P R Giddy, all of No 3 Sqn, and Sgts F W Beste, D H McBurnie and R Shaw of No 450 Sqn each claimed a C.200 destroyed. According to the Italians, all of the Stukas managed

Five-kill ace Maggiore Luigi Mariotti was CO of 150° *Gruppo's* 363ª *Squadriglia* from April 1939 to June 1942, and he later commanded 9° *Gruppo* of 4° *Stormo Caccia* and then the *stormo* itself. As CO of this famous fighter unit, he was shot down by German flak on 27 February 1944 while flying a P-39Q Airacobra over Mojkovac, in Montenegro. Mariotti was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour (*AM*)

to escape despite the attentions of No 112 Sqn. Flt Lt 'Jerry' Westenra claimed to have downed a C.200 and Sgt R B Evans a Ju 87.

In the wake of this devastating combat, Generale Rino Corso Fougier, *Regia Aeronautica* Chief of Staff, praised the 150° *Gruppo* pilots for their sacrifice which had allowed the Stukas to escape. But the Italians demanded better cooperation between their fighters and those flow by the Luftwaffe.

On 28 March three 150° *Gruppo* C.200s patrolling over Martuba intercepted Boston bombers of No 12 Sqn SAAF, escorted by Kittyhawks of No 94 Sqn, No 450 Sqn RAAF and No 2 Sqn SAAF. Sergente Maggiore Mario Angeloni was shot down, crashing to his death near the airfield.

The *gruppo* also carried out three strafing attacks during the month. Its pilots claimed to have destroyed a total of 20 vehicles and damaged a further 110. During a raid on a vehicle concentration south of Ain el Gazala on the 7th, 15 out of the 18 Macchis involved were hit by heavy anti-aircraft fire. Four crippled fighters landed at Tmimi, while the other 14 returned to Martuba with one pilot slightly wounded.

A week later, 21 C.200s attacked another concentration that was also strongly defended by flak batteries. The Italians threw themselves into the barrage nevertheless, and paid an immediate price. The aircraft of Sergente Maggiore Renato Zandonai, was hit during his dive in on the target and it crashed in flames. The *Saetta* of Sergente Maggiore Bruno Zotti was severely damaged and limped back to Martuba, only to crash on landing. A third Macchi failed to return, but its pilot eventually rejoined his unit.

The third and final strafing attack was performed on the 21st, and it achieved better results. A dozen C.200s surprised an enemy column south of Martuba, and this time no losses were suffered by the attackers.

No air battles were reported by 150° *Gruppo* in April, its pilots being kept busy instead flying tactical and armed reconnaissance missions over and behind the frontline. Some 78 sorties (36 armed reconnaissance and 42 tactical reconaissance) totalling 118 flying hours were flown. The month, however, started with four strafing missions. On the 2nd seven Macchis surprised enemy troops in the Bir Tengeder sector. Two *Saettas* were hit by anti-aircraft fire but their pilots were able to make it back to base. The next day the unit made a return visit to Bir Tengeder with ten Macchis, and despite heavy flak it suffered no losses. When this target was strafed again on the 4th by nine aircraft, the formation leader was hit and forced to make an emergency landing – he later returned to his unit. On 5 April 16 vehicles were destroyed and 60 others damaged when 150° *Gruppo* attacked transport routes in the Gadd el Ahmar area.

In May 150° *Gruppo* was relocated to K3 airfield in Benghazi, where the unit was tasked with the air defence of this Axis stronghold. During the first two weeks there, the *gruppo* flew several tactical reconnaissance missions over the Allied-held frontline. Throughout the month 598 hours were flown during the course of 389 sorties, of which 14 were tactical reconnaissance operations between the 1st and the 14th. Another 272 sorties involved patrols of the Benghazi area, 76 escorting inbound Axis shipping and 27 scrambles, six of which were performed by new C.202 *Folgore* fighters. A formidable and elegant aircraft, the latter had been temporarily assigned to 150° *Gruppo*, where it received a warm welcome from pilots.

The unit reported engaging in three aerial battles during the month. On 17 May a fighter on patrol over Benghazi harbour intercepted three enemy bombers and fired at them. On the 22nd a C.202 was scrambled to intercept an enemy reconnaissance aircraft, which its pilot claimed to have shot down. Two days later the pilots of a C.200 and a C.202 sighted a Beaufighter, but the British aircraft evaded the Italians by taking cover in the clouds.

Combat activity intensified in June, with the threat to the air defences of Benghazi coming not only from the air but also from the ground, as the SAS and LRDG were active in the area. And it was in June that the Italians encountered further new opponents when the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) made their first appearance in North African skies. That month a specially trained B-24D Liberator unit arrived at Fayid airfield, in Egypt, after being diverted from the Far East. This was the Halverson Provisional Detachment (dubbed the 'Halpro' unit), named after its commanding officer, Col Harry A Halverson. Benghazi's harbour soon became a frequent target for the 'Halpro' Liberators.

Meanwhile, 150° *Gruppo* was having its first encounter with the SAS. On the night of 13 June 1942 it raided Derna, Barce and Benghazi airfields to frustrate potential Axis attacks on the vitally-needed *Vigorous* convoy that was bound for Malta. The raids, however, did not proceed as planned. At Martuba and El Fteiah most participants were killed or captured, while at Barce only two small ammunition dumps were blown up. But SAS founder David Stirling led a highly successful attack on the Benina airfields, where a hangar and four German aircraft were totally destroyed and seven other machines badly damaged. At daybreak on the 14th 150° *Gruppo* joined a number of other Axis units in the hunt for the surviving British raiders as they withdrew to Kufra oasis, its Macchis performing reconnaissance missions up to 60 miles into the desert east of Benghazi.

During June 150° *Gruppo* had accumulated a further 532 operational flying hours in 380 sorties, 223 of which had been patrols, 108 naval convoy escorts, 24 reconnaissance missions and 21 scrambles. The unit had also mounted four strafing attacks on British raiders in the Msus area that had resulted in the destruction of four vehicles, with many others damaged.

DEFENDING BENGHAZI

In the period between 1 July and 8 November, the *gruppo* had been tasked with defending the harbour and airfields of Benghazi. It also provided escorts for Italian and German shipping taking supplies to Axis troops deployed on the El Alamein front, flew harbour and airfield patrols and maintained an alert flight on readiness to intercept Allied raiders.

The first raid on Benghazi by B-24D Liberators of the 'Halpro' unit saw nine Liberators attack the harbour during the night of 21 June. In July the tempo of these raids increased, resulting in the C.200s and

C.202s of 150° *Gruppo* scrambling from Benghazi's airfields on numerous occasions in an effort to intercept the big bombers. During three such scrambles on the 3rd, 5th and 23rd, the *gruppo's* fighters claimed to have shot down a Liberator, with another reported as a probable. There were daylight interceptions on the 11th, 13th, 15th and 23rd, resulting in claims for two more bombers destroyed and another probable. No Italian fighters were lost but several were damaged by return fire.

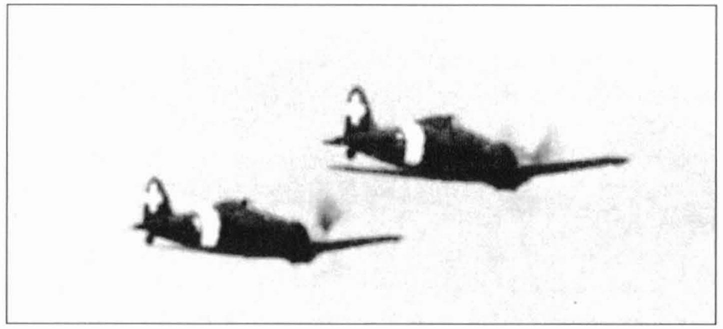
The Halverson Detachment reported that apart from the 21 June attack, it had raided Benghazi with ten of its Liberators on the night of 24/25 June and bombed Tobruk on 2 and 3 July, while two RAF Liberator IIs from the recently arrived No 159 Sqn were lost over Benghazi on 15 and 23 July.

The USAAF and RAF Liberators had been joined at Fayid on 28 June by nine B-17Es of the 9th Bomb Squadron (BS), 7th Bomb Group (BG) led by Gen Lewis Brereton. This unit claimed to have probably destroyed an ammunition ship in Benghazi harbour on the night of 5/6 July. Placed under the command of the 1st Provisional Group on 20 July, the heavy bomber units continued their attacks on Benghazi and Tobruk without respite, totalling 21 raids that month. At the end of July the 'Halpro' unit reported that it had lost four aircraft since its deployment to North Africa, with another bomber written off after a forced-landing and four more interned in Turkey.

But there were other demands on 150° *Gruppo* and its pilots besides combating the American raids. On 12 July two of its patrolling C.200s attacked a reconnaissance Beaufighter. The Italian pilots said they had seen numerous strikes on the British aircraft, and claimed it as a probable kill.

Through the months of August and September the *gruppo* was kept busy in the skies over Benghazi harbour, but as its patrols were mainly carried out at night there was limited contact with enemy aircraft. In fact, there was only one interception during this period, and that came on 9 August when the pilots of two fighters, one of which had been scrambled, engaged two Liberators with inconclusive results.

Attacks by SAS and LRDG raiding parties operating behind Axis lines continued to be a thorn in the side of German and Italian forces in North Africa. Indeed, these hit-and-run attacks were beginning to have a serious impact on morale, particularly those made between 14 and 17 September 1942. These were conducted in support of the ill-fated Allied operation *Agreement* against the port of Tobruk. Other raids on Axis airfields at Benghazi and Barce were preceded by heavy air attacks. At the latter airfield the LRDG destroyed 16 aircraft, although the combined SAS and LRDG attack on Benghazi, led by David Stirling, was a failure, with heavy losses again being suffered by the raiders. In the hunt for the withdrawing SAS forces *Regia Aeronautica* units flew 130 sorties from daybreak on 14 September. Of this number, 31 were flown by Macchis of 150° *Gruppo* in the Wadi Belgardan, Bir Balach and Msus areas.



Two C.200s fly side-by-side at low level in mid-1942. The Macchi fighter saw extensive service with 53° *Stormo* in various theatres (*AM*)

The Italian pilots also flew missions to counter the attempt by the Sudanese Defence Force to seize Jalo oasis in an effort to provide support for SAS and LRDG units. This meant that between 15 and 17 September, several armed reconnaissance missions were flown over the southern sector around El Gamara, El Garat, Soluch, El Qattara and Sceleidima. During these sorties the Macchi pilots claimed to have destroyed seven trucks, with many others badly damaged by machine gun fire.

September had seen the Allies undertake three daylight air attacks on Benghazi, with the raid on the 22nd causing severe damage both to ships unloading supplies and to the harbour installations themselves. The Italian fighters were alerted belatedly and failed to intercept the Allied bombers.

As a prelude to the decisive attack at El Alamein, Allied air activity was stepped up during October and into the first week of November. Ever larger formations of medium and heavy bombers challenged the pilots of 150° *Gruppo* to combat a determined enemy that had now achieved overwhelming air superiority. During their attempts to defend Benghazi harbour, the pilots of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* were called upon to attack large formations of four-engined bombers. They claimed one aircraft destroyed and several others damaged. Two Beaufighters were also shot up by the unit when they attempted to attack Axis shipping.

In November 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* engaged in two major air battles, on the 4th and on the 6th. The first of these clashes saw Macchis attack seven four-engined bombers, while on the second they took on Liberators. All told the Italian pilots claimed two probables and several others damaged.

On the 8th, after more than two years of overseas deployment, 150° *Gruppo* was ordered back to Italy. The unit left Libya two days later for Rome-Ciampino South airport, where it was to be reorganised.

During its operational tours in the Balkans and in Libya, the *Gigi Tre Osei Gruppo's* pilots had fought in 64 aerial combats and claimed 105 confirmed kills and 65 probables. In 87 strafing attacks they reported setting 141 vehicles on fire, with another 428 damaged. During these actions 30 pilots were listed as either killed or missing, and 19 others were wounded. For their actions they received a total of 31 Silver Medals and 31 Bronze Medals for Military Valour, not to mention three posthumous Gold Medals.

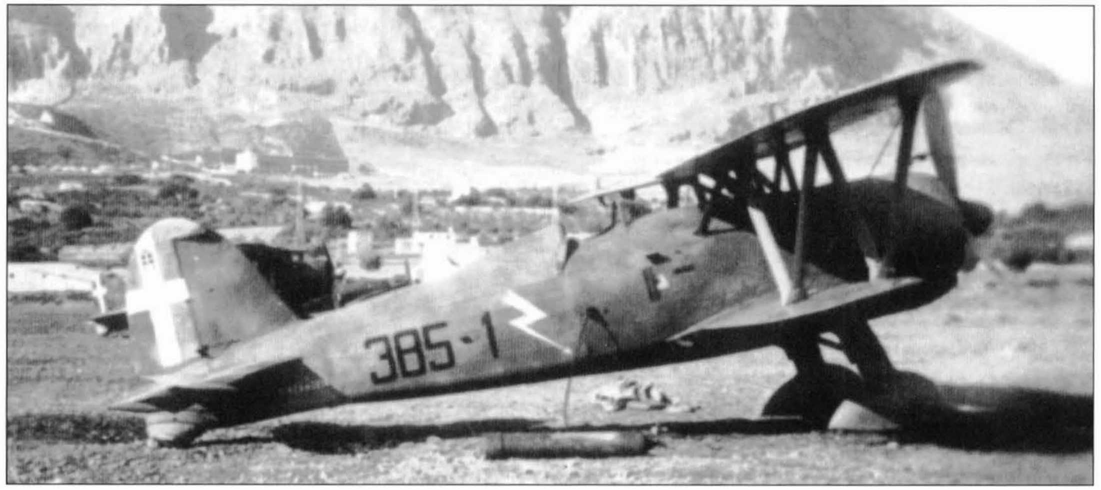
Upon its return to Italy the status of 150° *Gruppo* as an autonomous unit was confirmed – it would no longer be part of 53° *Stormo*. At the same time the *gruppo* was re-equipped with C.202s, although its pilots were grateful to receive Bf 109Gs a short while later.

THE STORY OF 157° *GRUPPO*

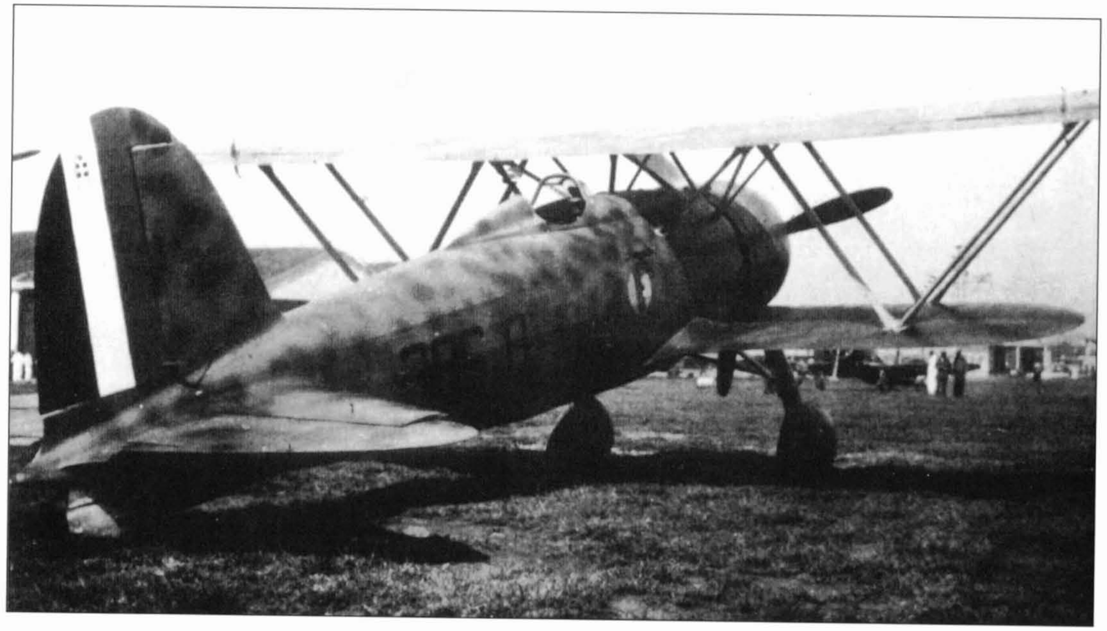
Although 157° *Gruppo* was associated with 53° *Stormo* for only a brief period of time, its activities still form part of the unit's story in World War 2. 157° replaced 151° *Gruppo* within 53° *Stormo* on 11 September 1940 and it remained part of that unit until its de-activation in February 1941, after which the *gruppo* operated autonomously.

Established at Turin's Caselle airfield on 1 April 1940 under the command of Tenente Colonello Osvaldo Baldi, it comprised three *squadriglie*, 384ª, 385ª and 386ª. On 10 May, the *gruppo* moved to Trapani airfield in Sicily to begin its operational training flying CR.42 fighters. Following Italy's entry in World War 2 in June, the *gruppo* (equipped with 19 CR.42s) was attached to 1° *Stormo* until 25 July. On the 8th of that month Maggiore Guido Nobili had become its CO. The three *squadriglie* commanders were Capitani Mario Frulla (384ª), Aldo Li Greci (385ª) and Gustavo Garretto (386ª).

Kept busy flying bomber escorts, convoy patrols and air defence missions, the *gruppo* had first seen action on 13 June when 15 CR.42s of 1° *Stormo* escorted 33 SM.79s (14 from 30° and 19 from 36° *Stormi*) during an attack on French airfields in the Tunis area. Three MS.406 fighters (probably from GC I/9) tried to intercept the bombers but 157° *Gruppo's* CR.42s drove them back. Two Morane-Saulnier fighters were damaged and one of them was seen to dive away trailing smoke. Maggiore Nobili, Sottotenente 'Gigi' Caneppele and Sergente Teresio Martinoli (both of 384ª *Squadriglia*) each fired their guns at an enemy fighter, while two CR.42s, flown by Sottotenente Angelo Carminati and Sergente Fausto Fiorani, were lost for unspecified reasons.



CR.42 MM5024 385-1 of 385ª *Squadriglia* (157° *Gruppo*, 1° *Stormo*) is seen at Trapani–Milo airfield in late June 1940. The aircraft displays a white lightning bolt on its fuselage, identifying it as the personal mount of Maggiore Guido Nobili, then the 157° *Gruppo* commander. Nobili, a nine-kill ace from the Spanish Civil War, later commanded 53° *Stormo* from 26 October 1940 through to its disbandment on 25 February 1941 (*AM*)



CR.42 386-8 of 157° *Gruppo*'s 386ª *Squadriglia*. Between 10 June and 25 July 1940, the *gruppo* was operationally attached to 1° *Stormo*, before gaining autonomous status and then joining 53° *Stormo* on 11 September 1940 (*AM*)

At 1305 hrs on the 22nd 17 Martin 167F bombers of GB I/62, II/62 and I/63 dropped 150 bombs on Trapani airfield, killing 20 and wounding 40 more. A dozen 157° *Gruppo* CR.42s (four from each *squadriglia*) were scrambled at 1310 hrs to intercept the intruders, although only two of them managed to catch the French aircraft. Sergenti Gullà of 386ª *Squadriglia* and Morana of 384ª *Squadriglia* attacked two bombers, claiming one badly damaged, before the Fiats landed at 1435 hrs.

On 25 August 386ª *Squadriglia* was re-deployed to Comiso airfield for operations against Malta. On 22 October, 157° *Gruppo* received its first C.200 monoplane fighters when 36 were handed over by 150° *Gruppo* just prior to it being transferred to Albania.

After the deactivation of 53° *Stormo* on 25 February 1941, 157° *Gruppo* was ordered to Ciampino South to be assigned to 52° *Stormo*. It was now comprised of 384ª and 357ª *Squadriglie*, the latter unit having previously been attached to 22° *Gruppo* CT. At the same time, 385ª *Squadriglia* moved to Sarzana airfield to form part of 52° *Stormo*, while 386ª *Squadriglia* was attached to 21° *Gruppo* at Capodichino airfield, near Naples.

On 15 October 1941, 157° *Gruppo*, now with a strength of 32 C.200s equipping its three *Squadriglie* (357ª, 384ª and 385ª), moved to North Africa, where it flew close escort missions for Axis dive-bombers. This activity was often carried out in cooperation with aircraft from 153° *Gruppo* 'Ace of Clubs'. The unit's pilots helped provide air cover for Axis motorised columns as they withdrew during Operation *Crusader*, after which it was ordered to Wadi Tamet airfield. Meanwhile, 357ª *Squadriglia* had moved to Agedabia to perform air defence duties and provide air cover for the retreating ground forces, which were being harassed by Tomahawk formations. In the meantime, 384ª and 385ª *Squadriglie* were posted back to Sorman to await repatriation.

157° *Gruppo* C.200 384-2 is serviced by unit groundcrewmen. Some of the latter are wearing World War 1-style helmets. Note also that the Fascist and Savoy markings have not been applied to this particular aircraft (*Archive Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)

The *gruppo* lost two aircraft during a battle with Tomahawks of No 112 Sqn over Tobruk airfield on 4 December, Plt Off Neville Duke pouncing on 384ª *Squadriglia* C.200s. Sottotenente Arrigo Zancristoforo was killed and an unnamed pilot forced to bail out of his stricken aircraft. The next day 14 C.200s of 153° and 157° *Gruppi* joined 14 G.50s of 20° *Gruppo* to provide close escort for 40 Italo-German Ju 87s attacking the Taieb el Esem-Bir el Gobi area. South of El Adem the formation was jumped by 22 Tomahawks of Nos 112 and 250 Sqns and a wild battle ensued, as described in Chapter 3.

On 29 December 157° *Gruppo*, comprising 384ª and 385ª *Squadriglie*, was transferred to Italy, while 357ª *Squadriglia* moved to Bir el Merduma, where it joined 150° *Gruppo* and was re-designated 364ª *Squadriglia*. On 17 April 1942, 157° *Gruppo* (made up of 357ª, 384ª and 385ª *Squadriglie*) was posted to a new operational sector in Greece. Based at Athens and Araxos, the unit immediately began providing round-the-clock air defence of the area, as well as covering Axis shipping. Between April and July 157° *Gruppo's* C.200s logged several hundred flying hours.

One example of the shipping escort duties flown over Greek waters (where the unit also operated with 7° *Gruppo Saettas*) came on 28 July 1942 when a reconnaissance Spitfire from Malta discovered an Italian convoy off Sapienza. The convoy comprised the large 5322-ton transport *Monviso*, en route from Brindisi to Benghazi, the Italian destroyer *Freccia* and the torpedo-boat *Calliope*. The RAF immediately prepared a strike force of six torpedo-armed Beauforts, with three others carrying bombs, and six Beaufighters led by Wg Cdr Pat Gibbs. In addition, a Baltimore of No 69 Sqn was assigned to fly above the formation to observe the attack and photograph the results.

Sighting the Italian convoy at midday, the force divided into its attack formations. While three of the Beaufighters provided top cover, the remaining three flew at low-level to strafe the escort ships. Simultaneously, the torpedo-carrying Beauforts dived to attack from either beam in flights of three. Torpedoed on the starboard beam, the *Monviso* had to be towed to the nearby Greek harbour of Navarino. The bomb-carrying Beauforts, meanwhile, attacked the *Freccia* but failed to score any hits.

Unfortunately for the attackers the convoy was being covered by a Luftwaffe Ju 88 and a Cant Z.506B floatplane of 139ª *Squadriglia*, flown by Tenente Gaetano Mastrodicasa. There was also a patrol of three C.200s nearby, these aircraft being flown by Capitano Fiacchino, Sottotenente Maddaloni and Sergente Piazza. The three Macchis intercepted the nine Beauforts as they broke away from their individual attacks. In the ensuing combat, Maddaloni claimed to have shot one down, while Fiacchino and Piazza probably destroyed a second torpedo-bomber.

Following this action the RAF reported losing two Beauforts. No 217 Sqn's AW296, flown by Wt Off R J Dawson, was hit in the port engine (probably by anti-aircraft fire from the warships) during its attack run and forced to ditch in the sea. Three of the crew managed to climb into their dinghy and were later picked up by the *Calliope*, while the fourth, navigator Flt Sgt E Sutherland, lost his life. No 217 Sqn Beaufort L9820, flown by South African Lt T Strever, was hit in both engines and also forced to ditch, causing the navigator, Plt Off B Dunsmore, to badly lacerate one of his arms. This was probably the Beaufort claimed by Maddaloni. All four crewmen scrambled into their dinghy, and shortly thereafter they were spotted by a low-flying C.202, which then circled above them. Half-an-hour later, Mastrodicasa's floatplane alighted near the dinghy. The four rescued men were flown to the Greek port of Preveza, and the next day Z.506B floatplane MM45432/'13' of 139ª *Squadriglia*, again flown by Mastrodicasa, took off with them onboard, bound for Italy and captivity.

The story did not end there, however, as the British aircrew were able to overpower their Italian counterparts, and guards, on board and hijack the floatplane, which they flew to Malta. For this deed, Lt Strever and his crew were awarded two DFCs and two DFMs.

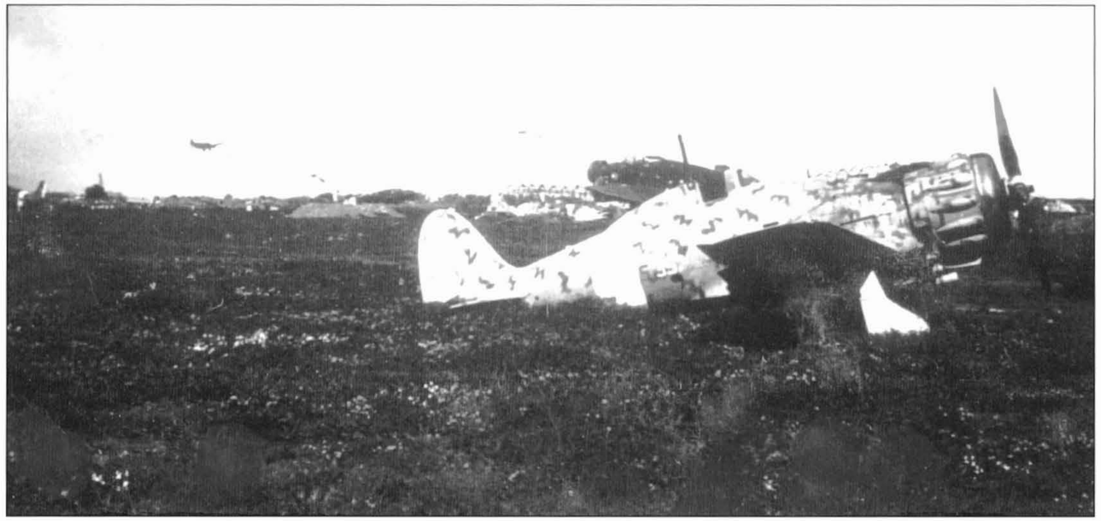
A *Gigi Tre Osei* Bf 109G-6 is serviced at Sciacca airfield in spring 1943 alongside C. 200 384-8 of 157° *Gruppo's* 384ª *Squadriglia*. Note the C.202s in the background (*AM*)

Meanwhile, No 86 Sqn Beaufort AW302, flown by Flg Off Peter Roper, was severely damaged by one of the Macchis. Although it was able to return to Malta, it was written off in a forced-landing at Luqa airfield. Roper reported that return fire from his gunners had inflicted some damage on the attacking Macchis, although this was not acknowledged by the Italians. Roper's aircraft was almost certainly the one claimed as probably shot down by Fiacchino and Piazza during the action over the convoy.

Between 28 November and 14 December, 157° *Gruppo's* 357ª and 384ª *Squadriglie* were deployed from Greece to Sicily where, on the 18th of the latter month, they was joined by a third *squadriglia*, 358ª. On 31 December the C.200s of 384ª *Squadriglia* reached El Alouina, in Tunisia, from where they flew ground attack missions. By 12 February 1943 the unit was operating from Tunis, and on the 26th five of its *Saettas*, escorted by C.202s, strafed French units 19 miles southwest of Pont du Fahs. Intense anti-aircraft fire exacted its toll, hitting three C.200s. Tenente Castoldi bailed out and was captured, Tenente Michele Casucci was killed in a crash-landing and Sergente Coccoz force-landed near Grombalia. Badly wounded, Coccoz was rescued by German troops.

By the time 384ª *Squadriglia* ended its Tunisian tour on 3 March 1943, it was running very short of aircraft. Indeed, when it returned to Castelvetrano the unit had just four C.200s to its name. Three others remained in Tunisia, two of which were unserviceable at Tunis airfield and the third was stranded at El Alouina because there was no one there qualified to fly it.

357ª *Squadriglia*, meanwhile, had had Tenente Adolfo Cavallero killed on 8 February when his C.200 crashed into the sea after suffering engine failure. A Z.506 floatplane set off from Sicily, escorted by a 157° *Gruppo* C.200, to look for the missing pilot, but both machines were attacked by three RAF Beaufighters from No 603 Sqn. The lone *Saetta* pilot fought valiantly in the defence of the floatplane, severely damaging one of the Beaufighters, which reportedly flew off trailing smoke in its wake.

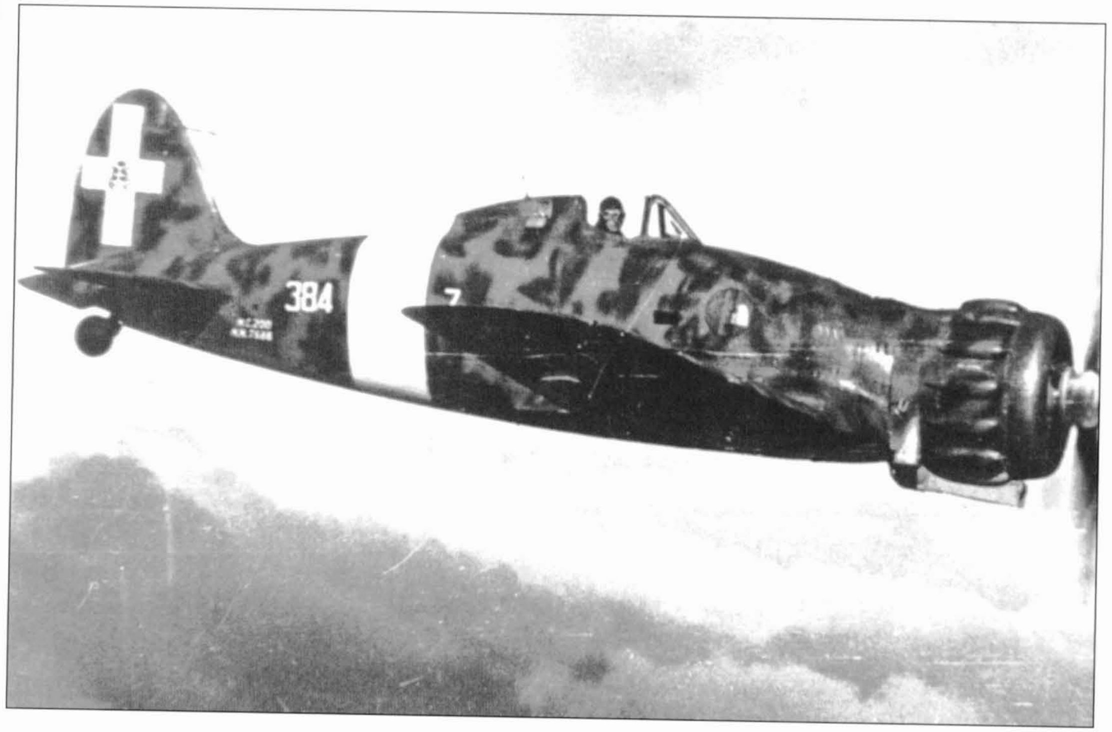


C.200 357-5 of 157° *Gruppo's* 357ª *Squadriglia* sits idly between missions on an Axis airfield in Sicily in early 1943. Note Axis aircraft both dispersed (some wrecked) and busy flying in the background (*Archive Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)

C.200 384-8 of 384ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo Sotto a chi tocca!* (which roughly translates as 'Forward the next!') is seen at Sciacca airfield in 1943. 384ª *Squadriglia* flew ground attack sorties during the Tunisian campaign (*AM*)

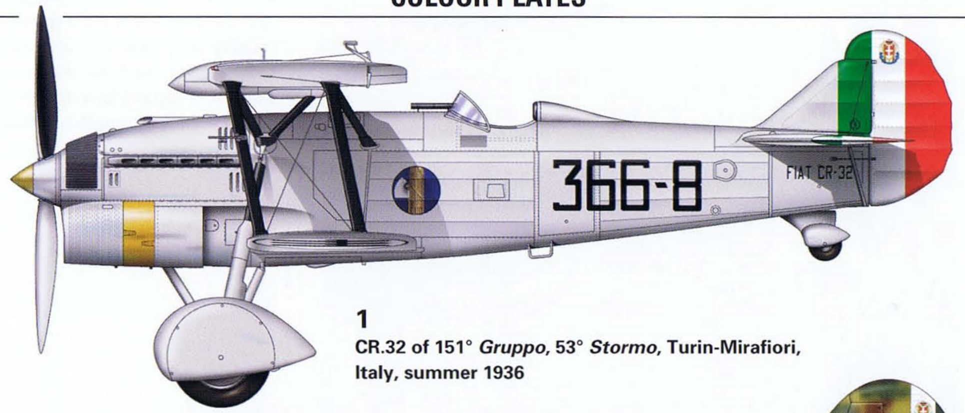
The unit suffered severe losses on 10 April when five C.200s of 157° *Gruppo* were tasked with escorting 18 SM.82 and two SM.75 transports bound for Tunisia. The formation was intercepted over the Sicilian Straits by 25 P-38s of the USAAF's 1st Fighter Group (FG), and in the resulting slaughter the Lightnings downed eight SM.82s and two SM.75s. The Macchis of Sottenente Luigi Toros and Sergente Luigi Benso were also lost.

By 9 July 157° *Gruppo* was based at Reggio Calabria, on the 'toe' of the Italian peninsula. Its total strength comprised just 12 C.200s split between three *Squadriglie*, 371ª, 357ª and 163ª. Two months later, on 7 September, 157° *Gruppo*, now consisting of 357ª, 371ª and 384ª *Squadriglie*, could field just seven C.200s at the Apulian airfield of Grottaglie. The next day Italy surrendered to the Allies.



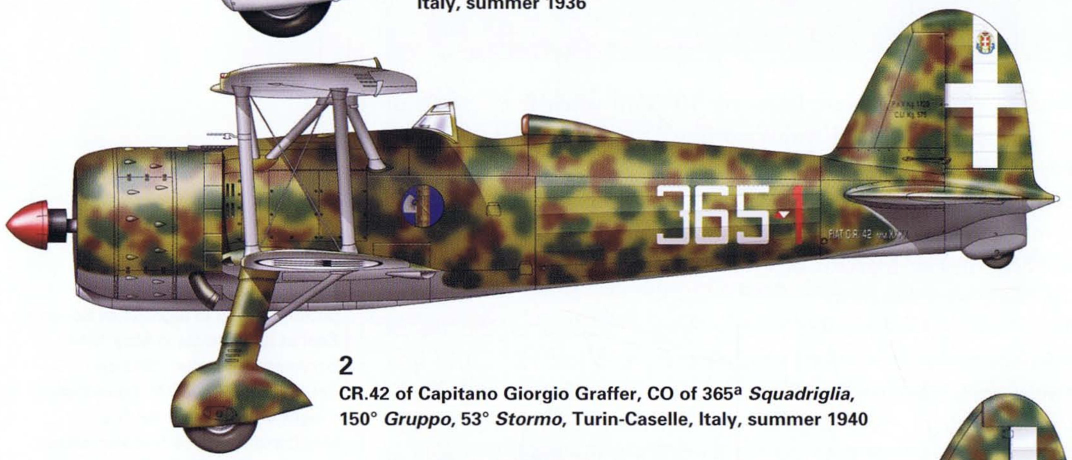
C.200 384-7 MM7688 of 384ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo*) photographed in flight with Sergente Zani at its controls in May 1943. Between December 1942 and September 1943, 384ª *Squadriglia* fought extensively over the Mediterranean and Tunisian skies, being based in Sicily, Tunisia and Apulia (*CMPR via Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)

COLOUR PLATES


366-8
FIAT CR-32

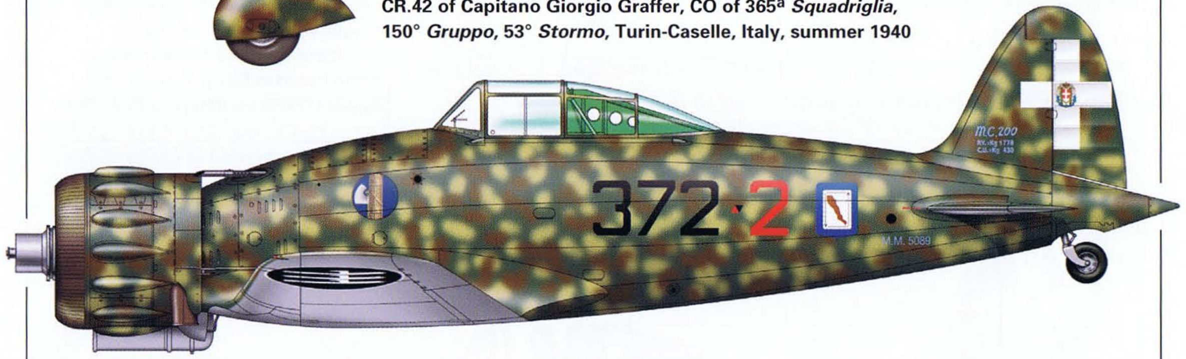
1

CR.32 of 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Mirafiori, Italy, summer 1936



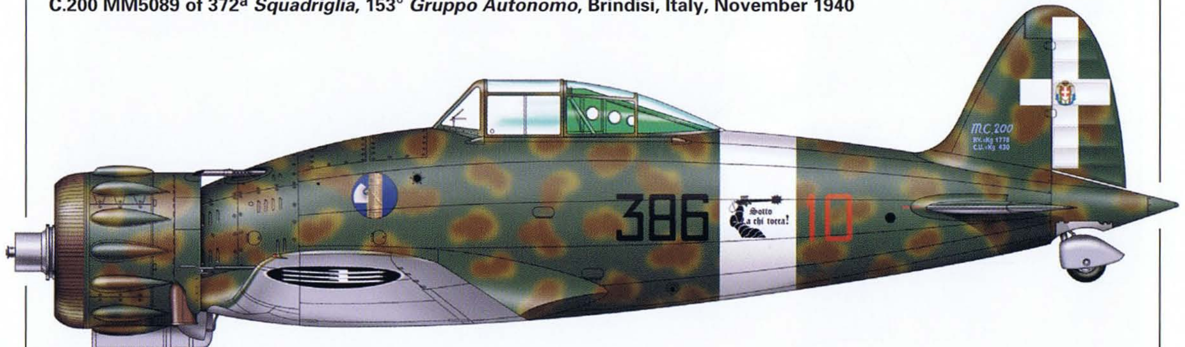
2

CR.42 of Capitano Giorgio Graffer, CO of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, summer 1940


372-2
M.C.200
M.M. 5089

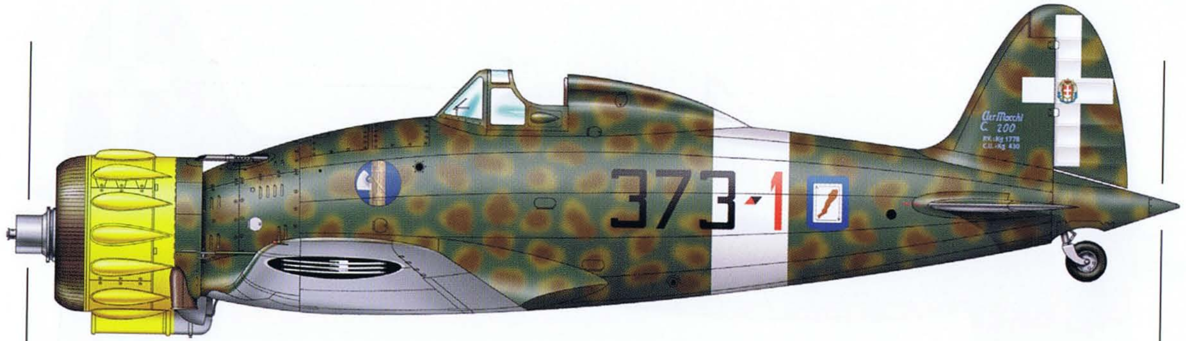
3

C.200 MM5089 of 372ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Brindisi, Italy, November 1940


386
Sotto a chi tocca!
10
M.C.200

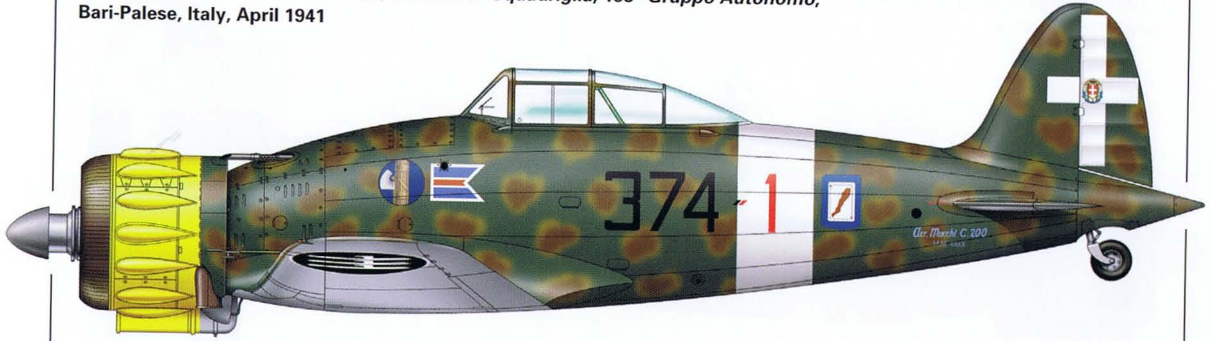
4

C.200 of Sottotenente Luigi 'Gino' Del Bufalo, 386ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy November 1940


373-1
Aer.Macchi C.200

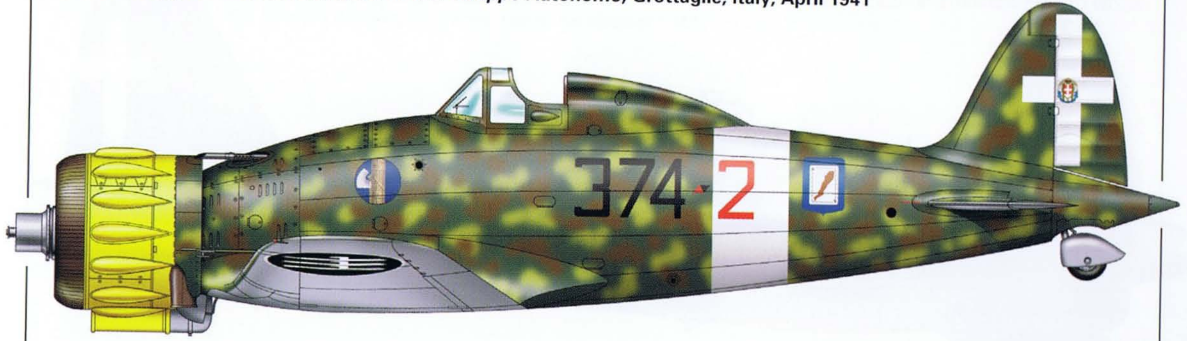
5

C.200 of Tenente Cesare Marchesi, CO of 373ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Bari-Palese, Italy, April 1941


374-1
Aer.Macchi C.200

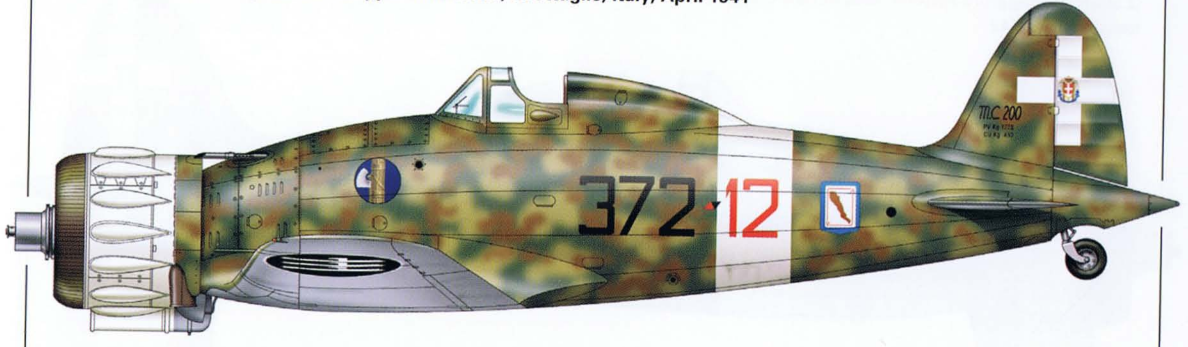
6

C.200 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Grottaglie, Italy, April 1941



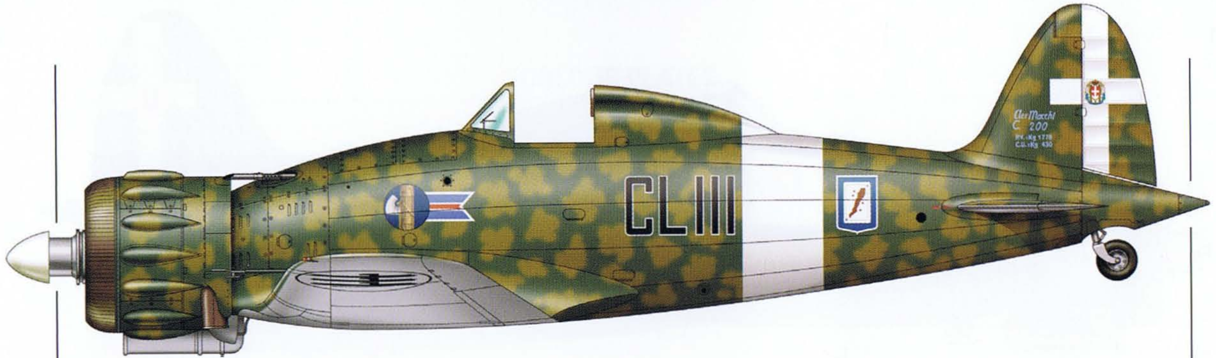
7

C.200 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Grottaglie, Italy, April 1941


372-12
M.C.200

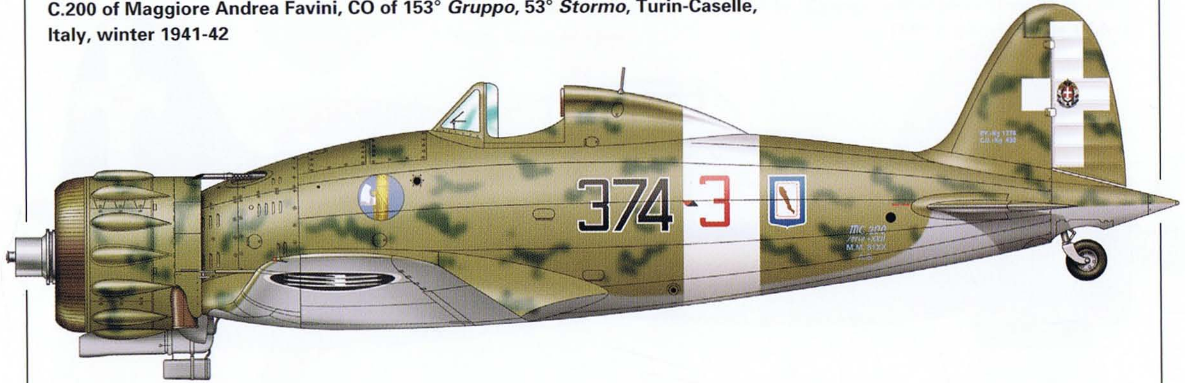
8

C.200 of 372ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, the Balkans, April 1941



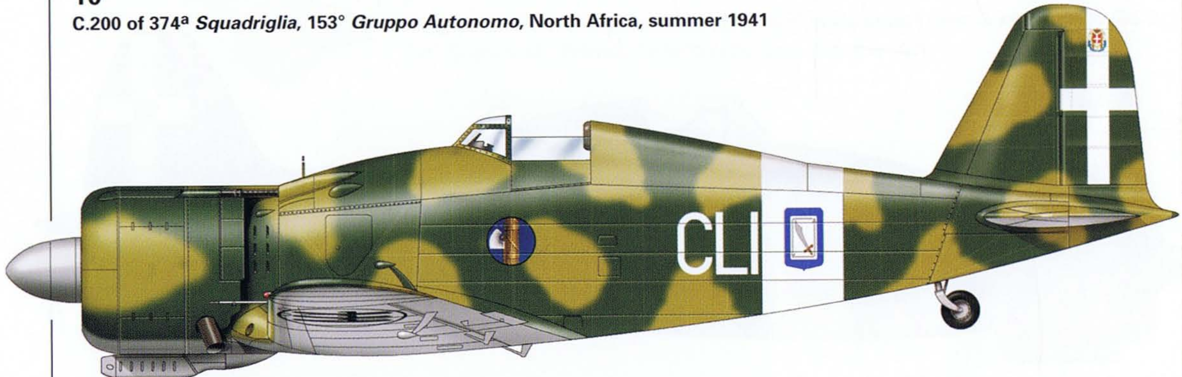
9

C.200 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, winter 1941-42



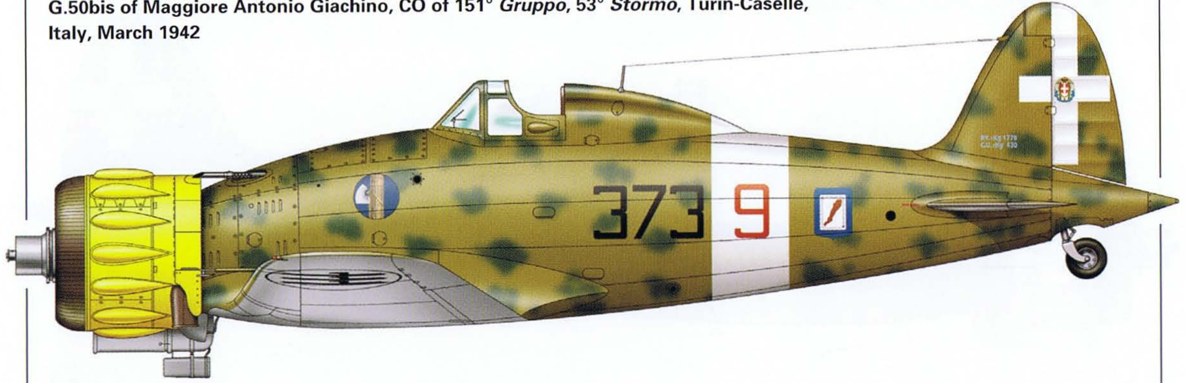
10

C.200 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, North Africa, summer 1941



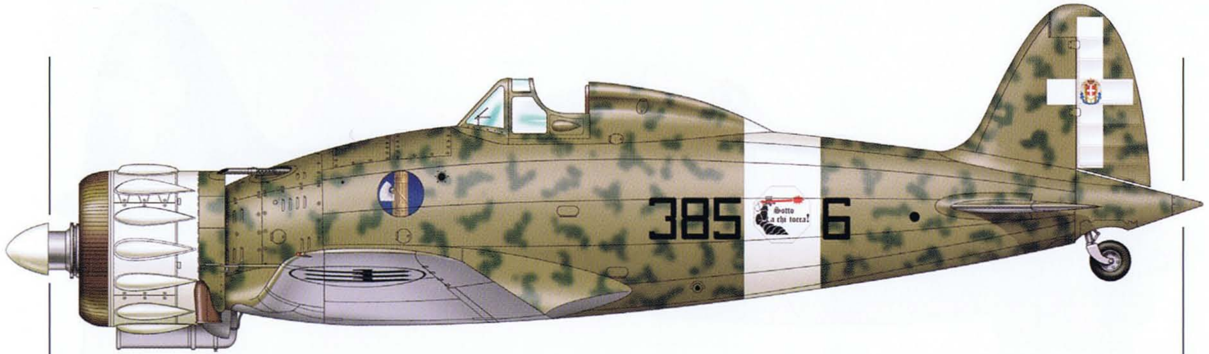
11

G.50bis of Maggiore Antonio Giachino, CO of 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, March 1942



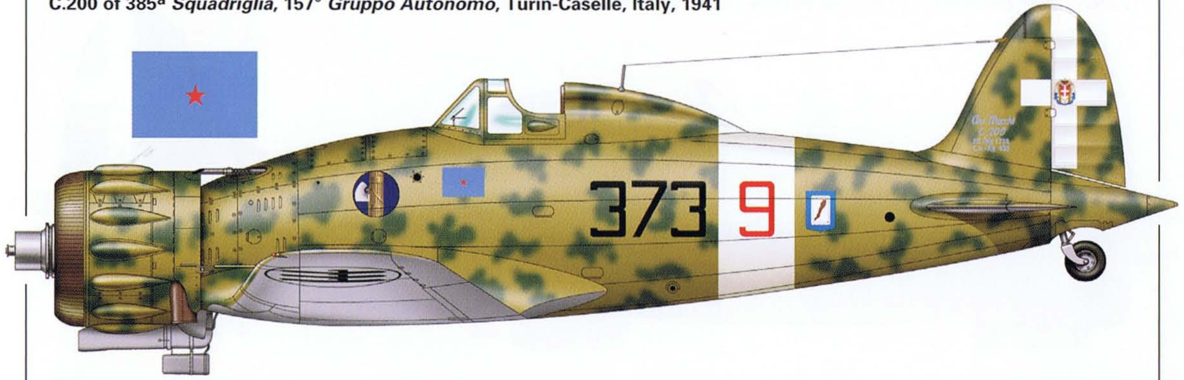
12

C.200 of 373ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, North Africa, summer 1941



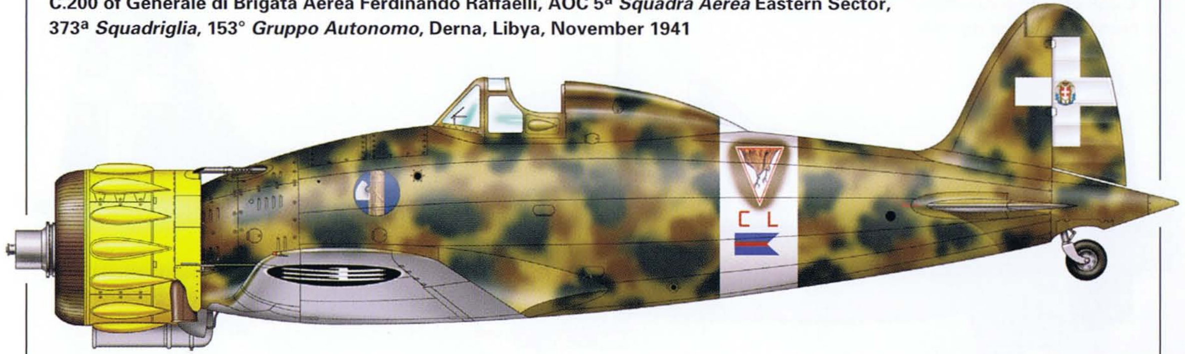
13

C.200 of 385ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, 1941



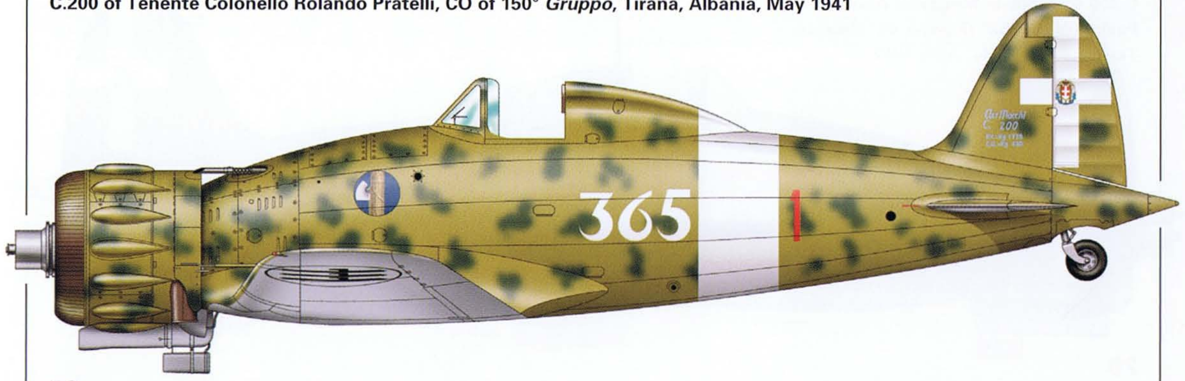
14

C.200 of Generale di Brigata Aerea Ferdinando Raffaelli, AOC 5ª *Squadra Aerea* Eastern Sector, 373ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Derna, Libya, November 1941



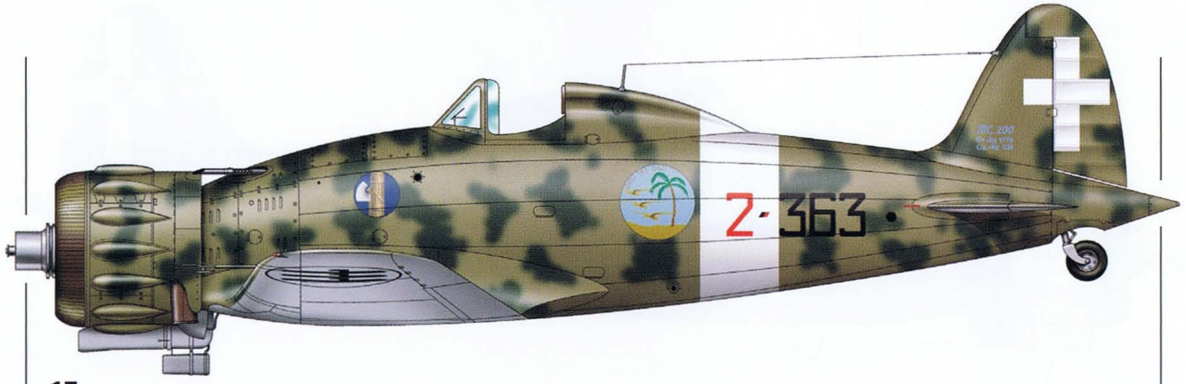
15

C.200 of Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli, CO of 150° *Gruppo*, Tirana, Albania, May 1941



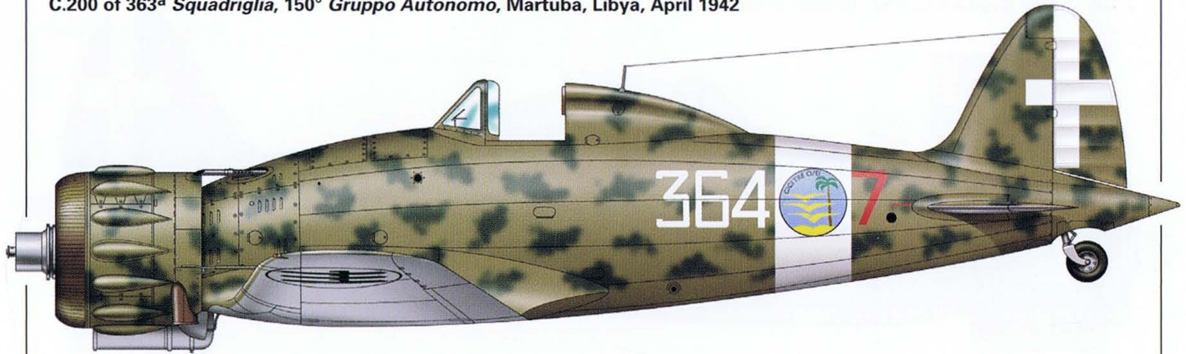
16

C.200 of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, En Nofilia, Libya, January 1942



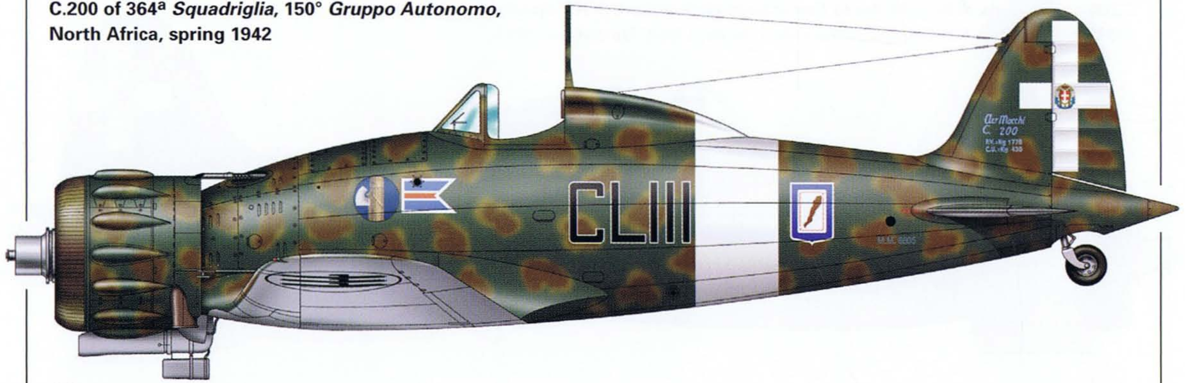
17

C.200 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Martuba, Libya, April 1942



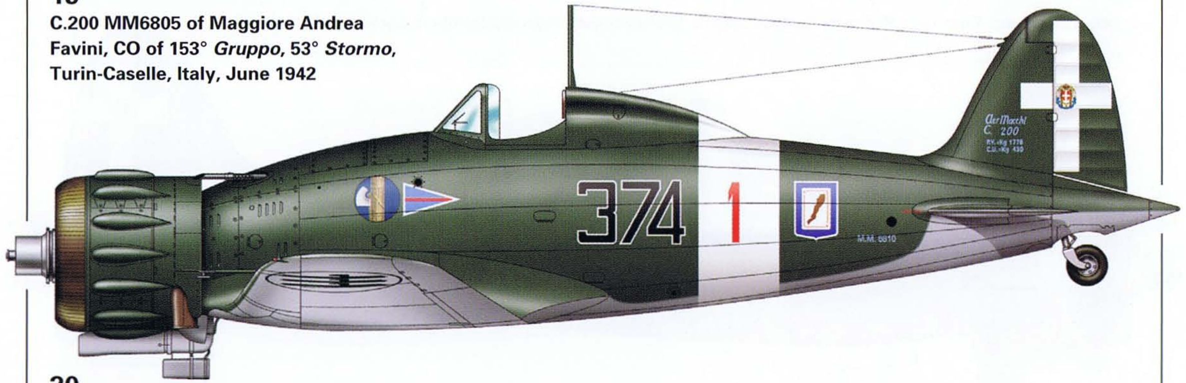
18

C.200 of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, North Africa, spring 1942



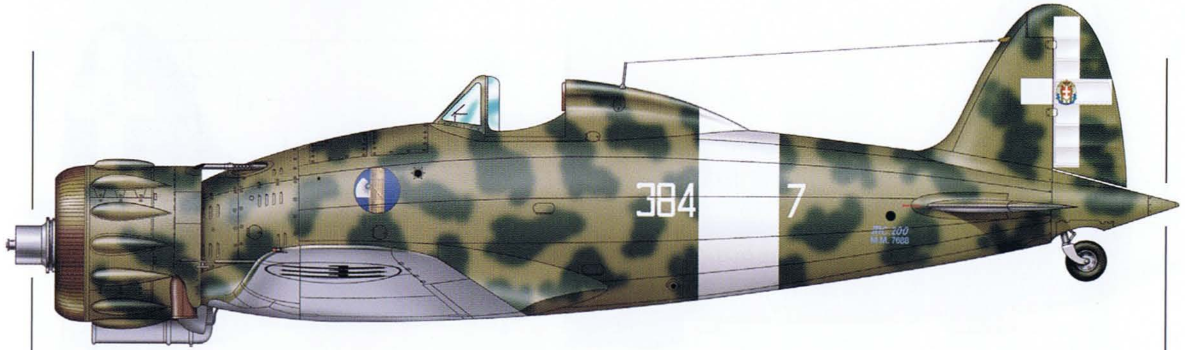
19

C.200 MM6805 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, June 1942



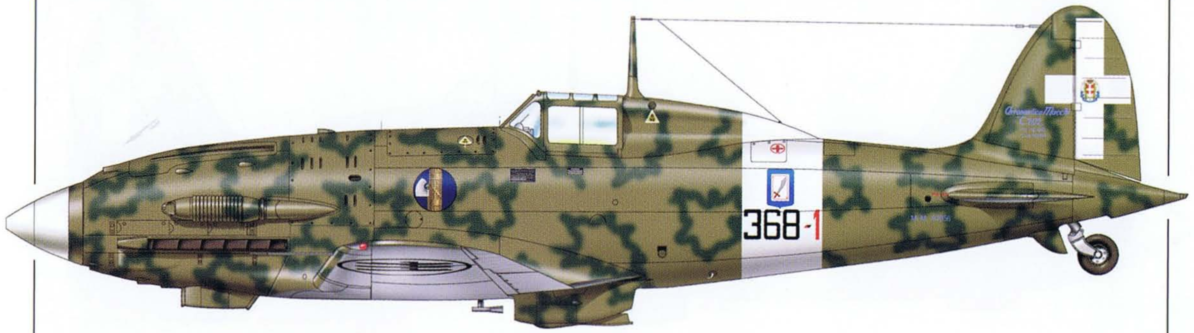
20

C.200 MM6810 of Capitano Natale Veronesi, CO of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, 1942



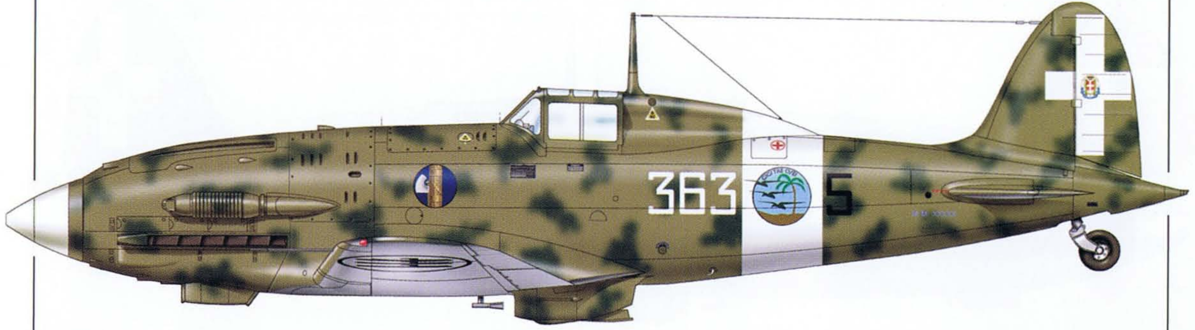
21

C.200 MM7688 of Sergente Zani, 384ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Castelvetrano, Sicily, May 1943



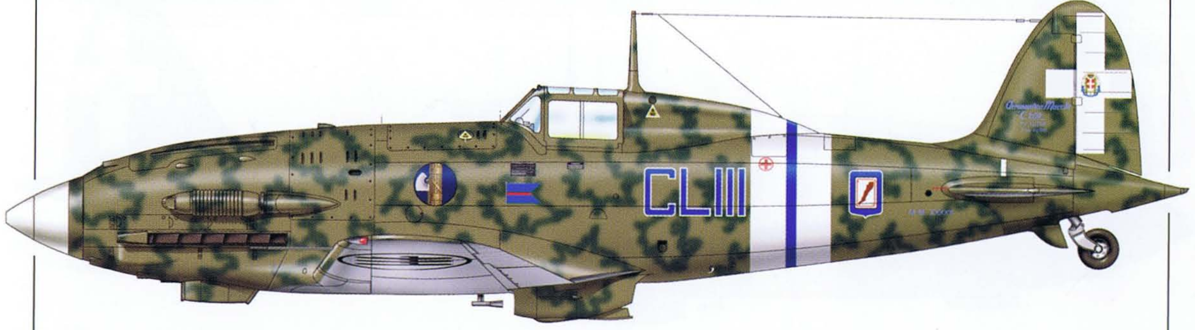
22

C.202 of Capitano Mario Ferrero, CO of 368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Tunisia, early 1943



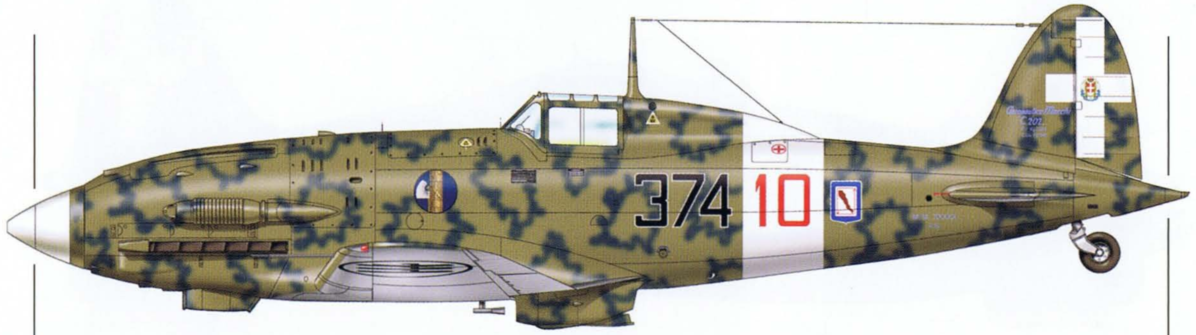
23

C.202 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, K3 Benghazi, Libya, July 1942

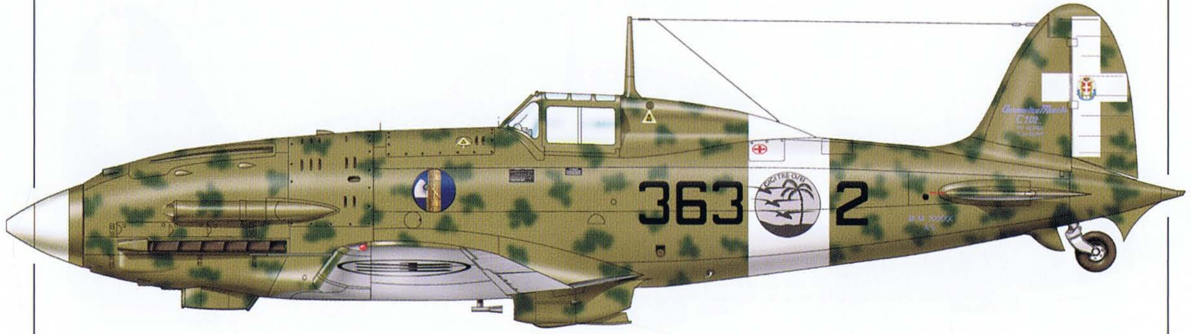


24

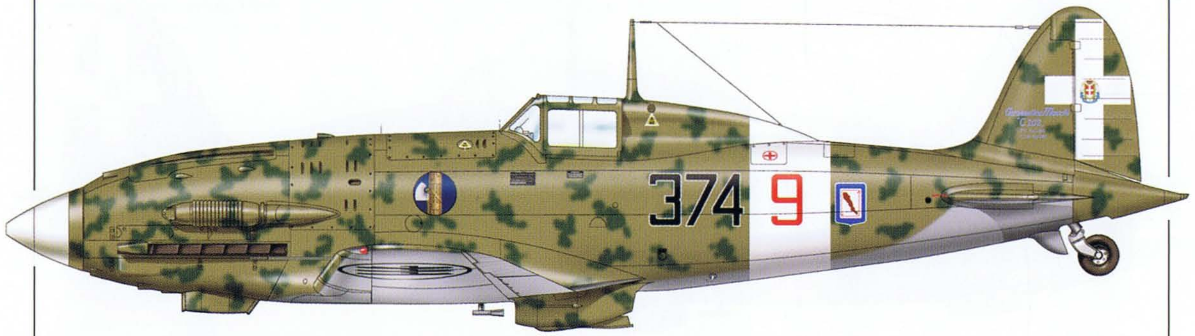
C.202 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sicily, late 1942



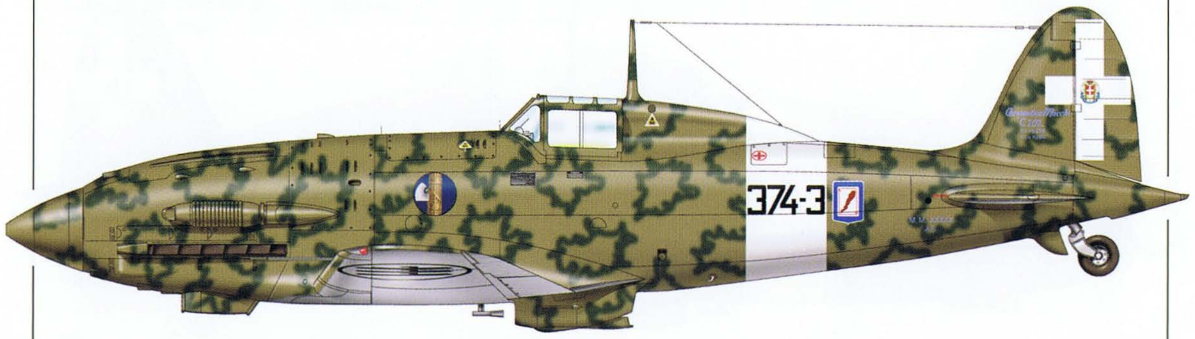
25
C.202 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sicily, autumn 1942



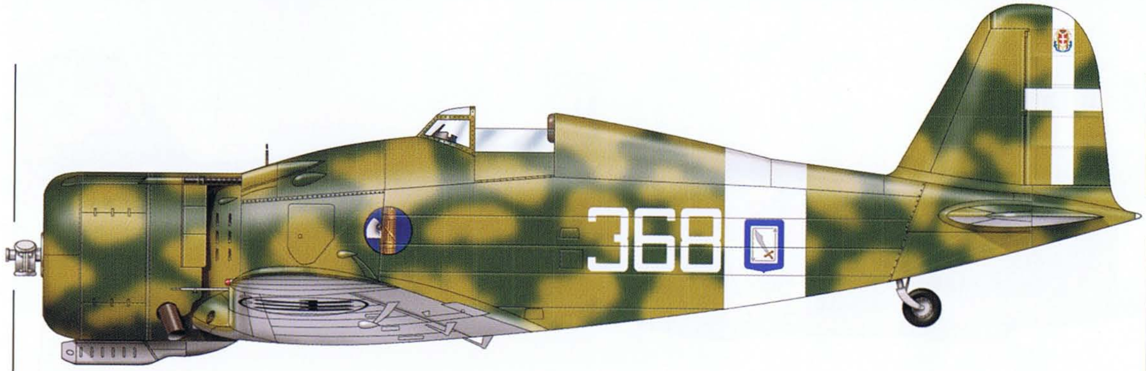
26
C.202 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, K3 Benghazi, Libya, summer 1942



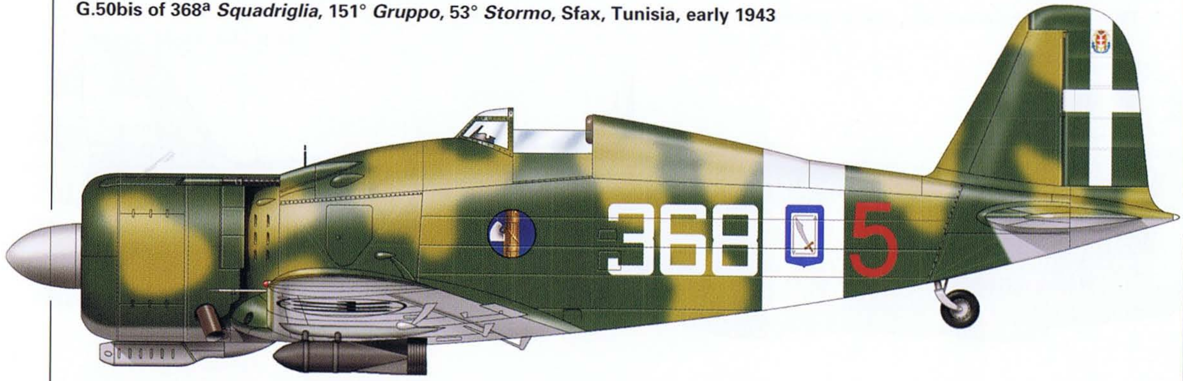
27
C.202 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Palermo-Boccadifalco, Sicily, July 1943



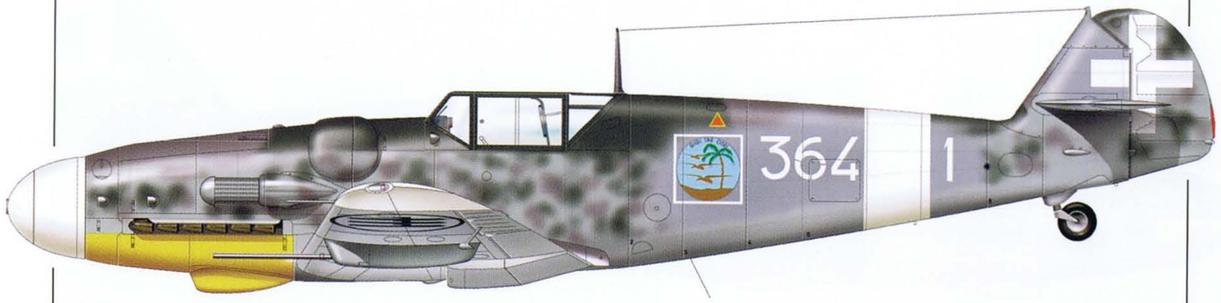
28
C.202 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Palermo-Boccadifalco, Sicily, summer 1943



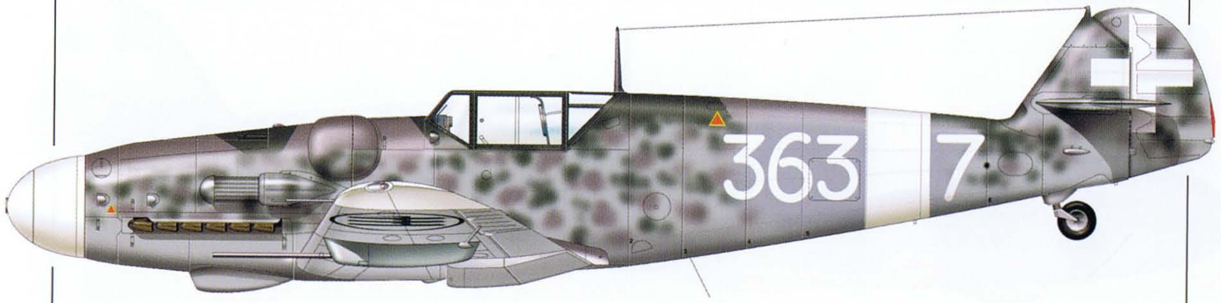
29
G.50bis of 368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sfax, Tunisia, early 1943



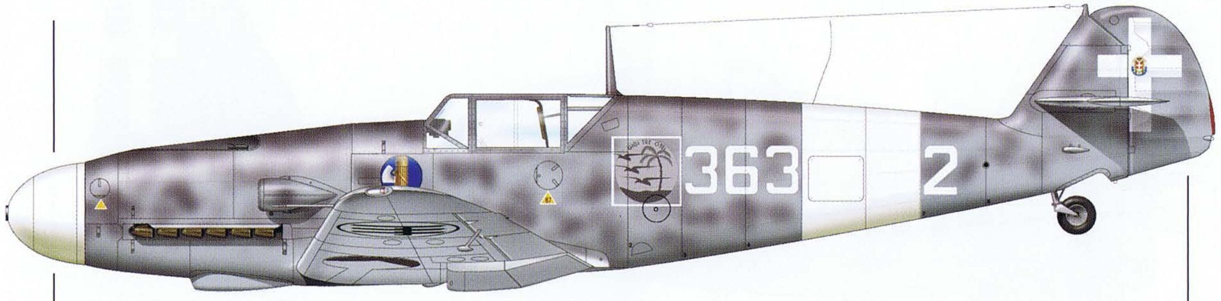
30
G.50bis MM5236 of 368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sfax, Tunisia, early 1943



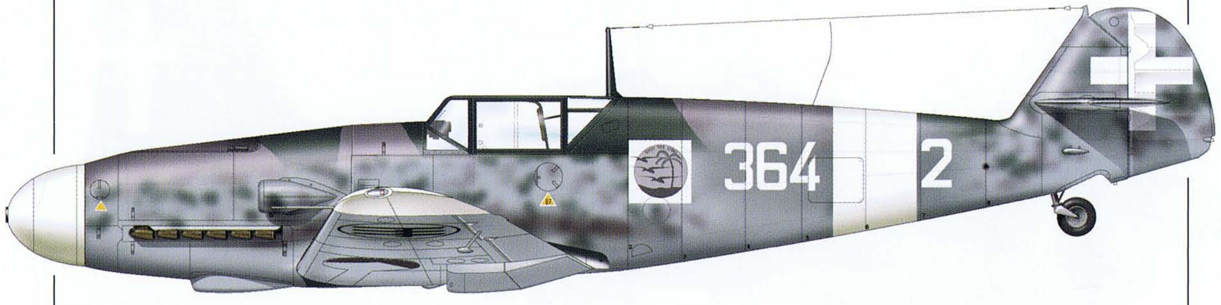
31
Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18391 of Capitano Mario Bellagambi, CO of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943



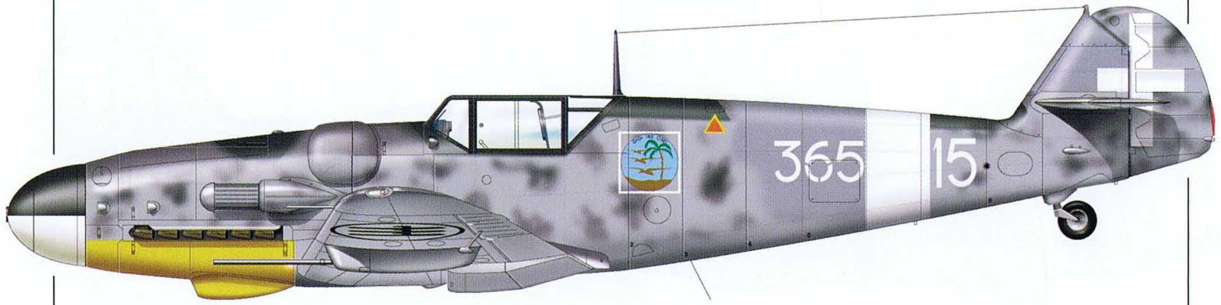
32
Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18421 of Tenente Ugo Drago, CO of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, summer 1943



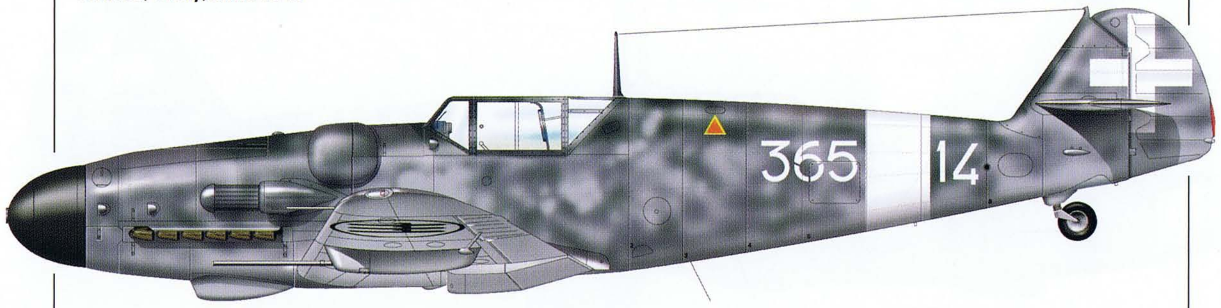
33
Bf 109F-4 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943



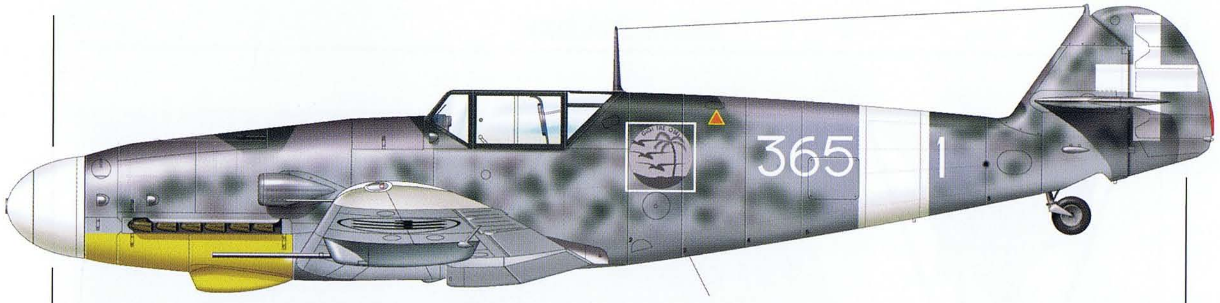
34
Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 16594 of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943



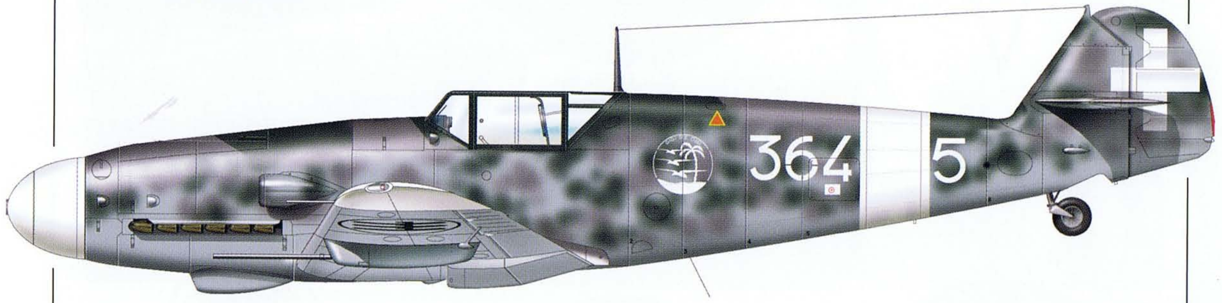
35
Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18367 of Tenente Giosuè Carillo, 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943



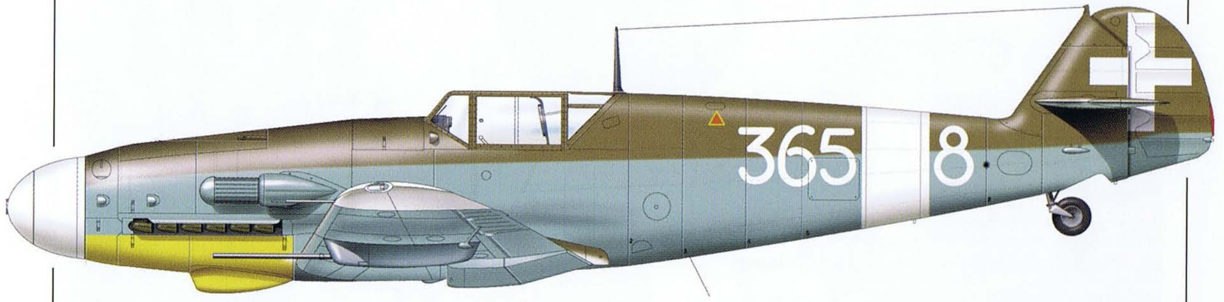
36
Bf 109G-6/R6 trop of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943



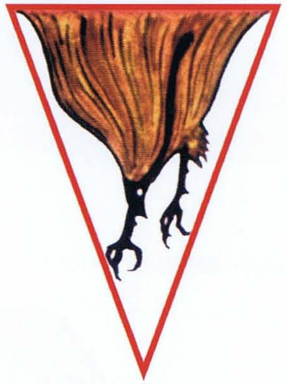
37
Bf 109G-4/R6 Wk-Nr. 19566 of Tenente Giuseppe Gianelli, CO of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943



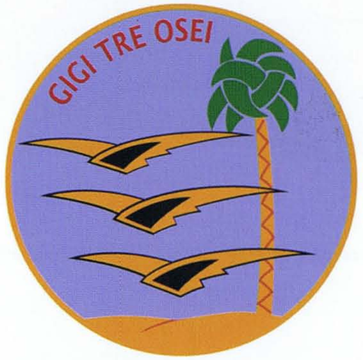
38
Bf 109G-4/R6 Wk-Nr. 19426 of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943



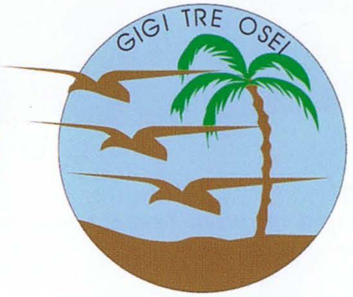
39
Bf 109G-2/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 10825 of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943



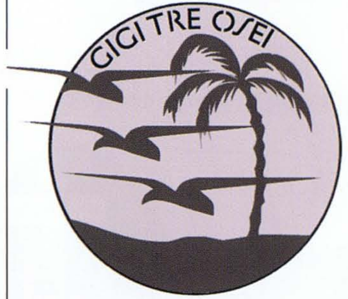
1
Early unit emblem of 150° *Gruppo CT* which was used until February 1942


GIGI TRE OSEI

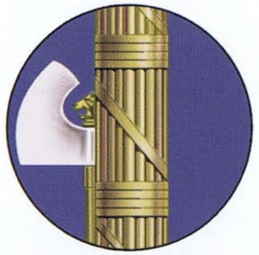
2
Standard full colour 150° *Gruppo Gigi Tre Osei* emblem


GIGI TRE OSEI

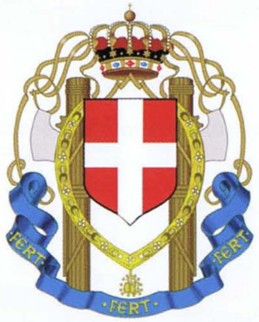
3
Stylised colour 150° *Gruppo Gigi Tre Osei* emblem


GIGI TRE OSEI

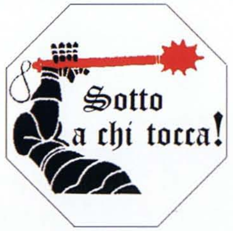
4
Stylised monochrome 150° *Gruppo Gigi Tre Osei* emblem



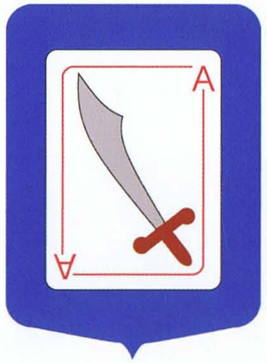
5
Standard *Regia Aeronautica* fuselage *fasces*


FERT
FERT
FERT

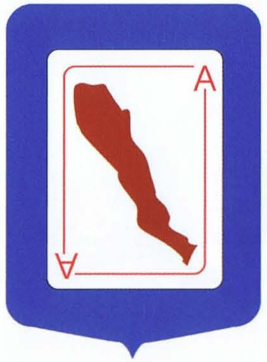
6
House of Savoy crest, usually applied to the Italian national marking on the rudder


Sotto
a chi tocca!

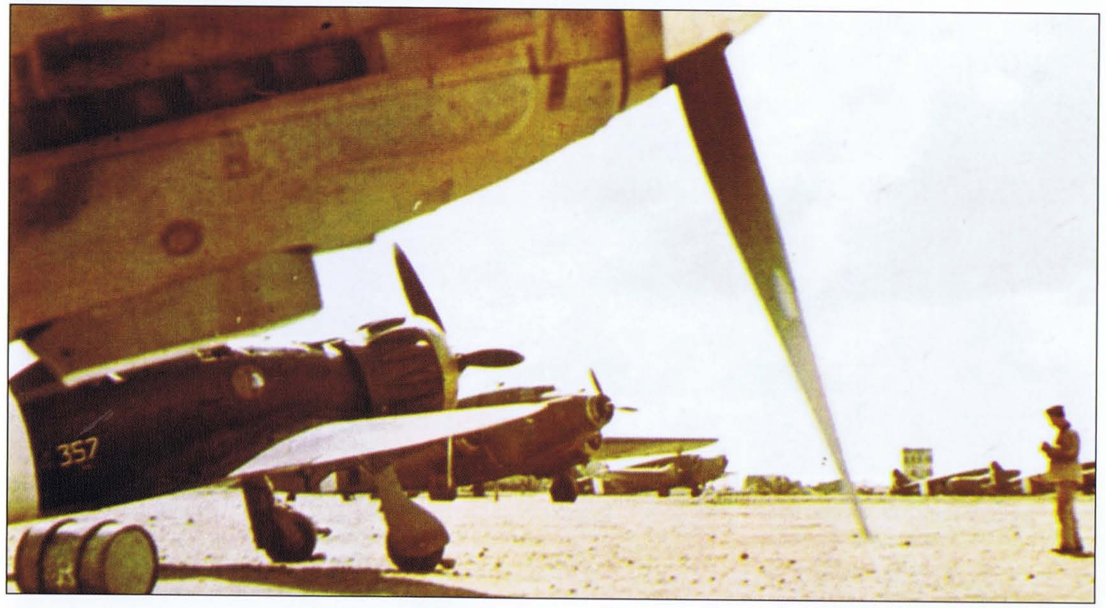
7
157° *Gruppo* CT unit emblem



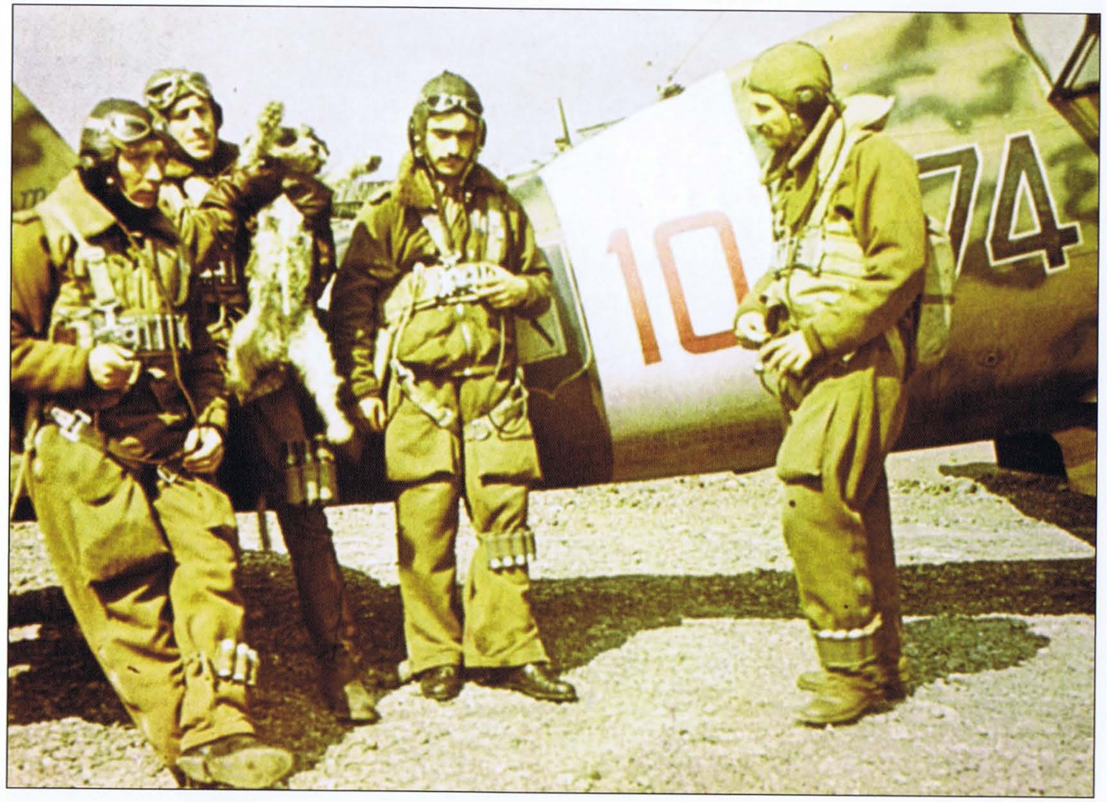
8
Blue-bordered 151° *Gruppo* CT *Asso di Spade* unit emblem



9
Blue-bordered 153° *Gruppo* CT *Asso di Bastoni* unit emblem



1



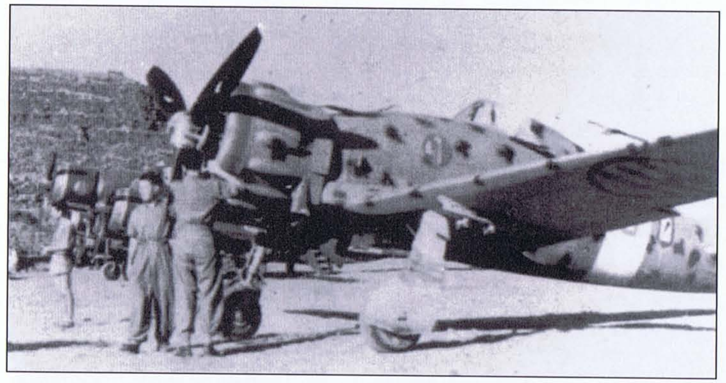
2

3

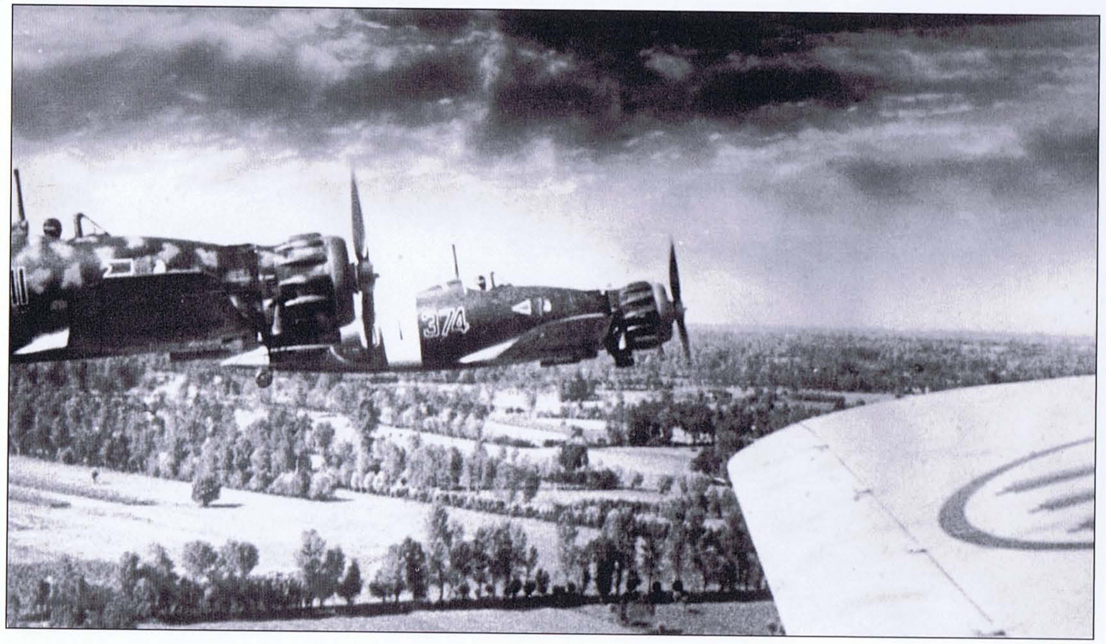
4

THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN

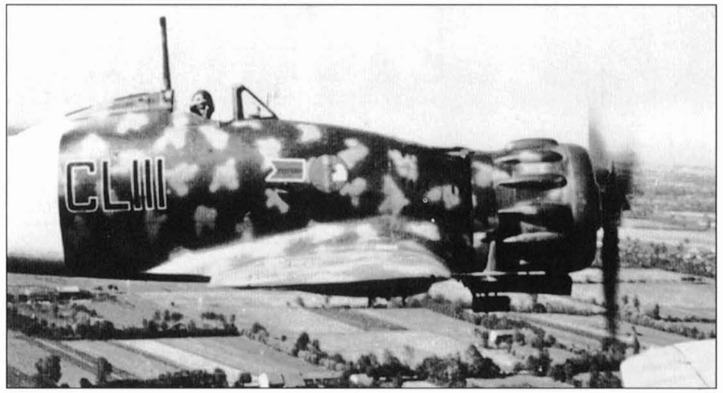
53° *Stormo* had been deactivated on 25 February 1941, and it remained dormant until reformed at Caselle airfield between 1 and 3 January 1942. Assigned 151° and 153° *Gruppi*, the unit was tasked with providing the air defence of northwest Italy. The *stormo* received a mixed bag of aircraft, with G.50s equipping 151° *Gruppo* (now christened the *Asso di Spade* ('Ace of Spades') and comprising 366ª, 367ª and 368ª *Squadriglie*) and C.200s issued to 153° *Gruppo* (also known as the *Asso di Bastoni* ('Ace of Clubs'), which consisted of 372ª, 373ª and 374ª *Squadriglie*).



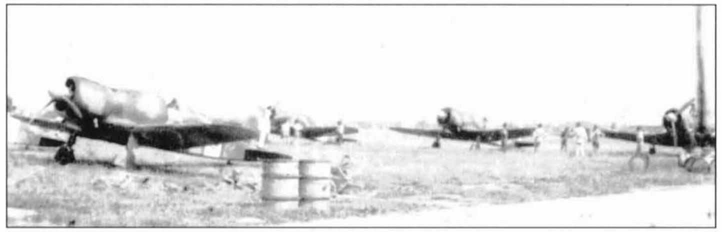
This 153° *Gruppo* 'Ace of Clubs' C.200 has been fitted with underwing bomb racks (*AM*)



The C.200s of the 153° *Gruppo* and 374ª *Squadriglia* commanders climb away from Caselle airfield in the spring of 1942. Note the rank pennants on both machines (*Archive Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)



Another aerial view of the C.200 assigned to the 153° *Gruppo* CO. The commanding officers of the 'Ace of Clubs' *gruppo* (when *Saetta*-equipped) were Maggiore Alberto Beneforti (May to November 1940), Maggiore Andrea Favini (November 1940 to April 1943) and Maggiore Natale Veronesi (April to September 1943). This photograph shows Maggiore Favini at the controls of the C.200 (*Tarantola family via Moruzzi*)

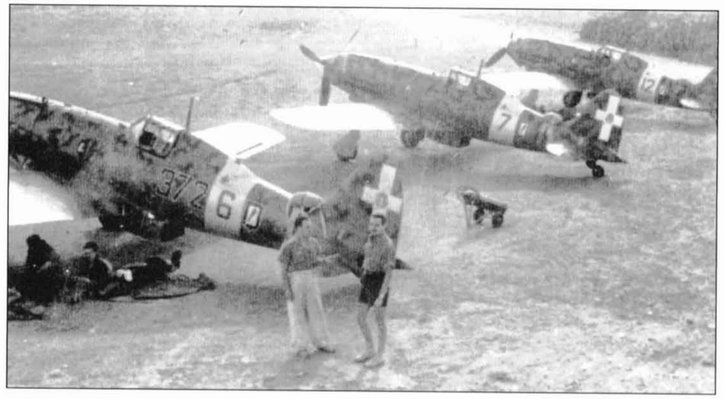


On 31 July 1942, 53° *Stormo's* 151° *Gruppo* was transferred to Araxos airfield in Greece, where its G.50s would help protect Axis merchant shipping operating in local waters (*AM*)

In a ceremony staged at Caselle airfield in March, 53° *Stormo* was presented with its war flag to signify its return to active duty. In the months that followed, the unit was involved in an intensive training programme. The *stormo* also flew numerous air defence missions over Milan and Turin, during which three pilots were killed in flying accidents. One of those to die was Sottotenente Davide Colauzzi, who perished on 19 August.

Because of the constant threat posed by Allied aircraft, 53° *Stormo's* two *gruppi* were again forced to operate separately in sectors. On 31 July 151° *Gruppo* was deployed with its G.50s to Araxos airfield in Greece, where its pilots escorted naval convoys. Meanwhile, 153° *Gruppo* began operations in central Mediterranean skies when 21 newly-delivered C.202s were sent to the Sardinian airfield of Decimomannu on 11 August. There, they were to escort Axis bombers poised to attack the Malta-bound *Pedestal* convoy.

Generale di Squadra Aerea Ferruccio Ranza (left), AOC 4ª *Squadra Aerea* in southern Italy, meets 151° *Gruppo* personnel at Araxos in 1942. Ranza had scored 17 victories during World War 1 (*AM*)

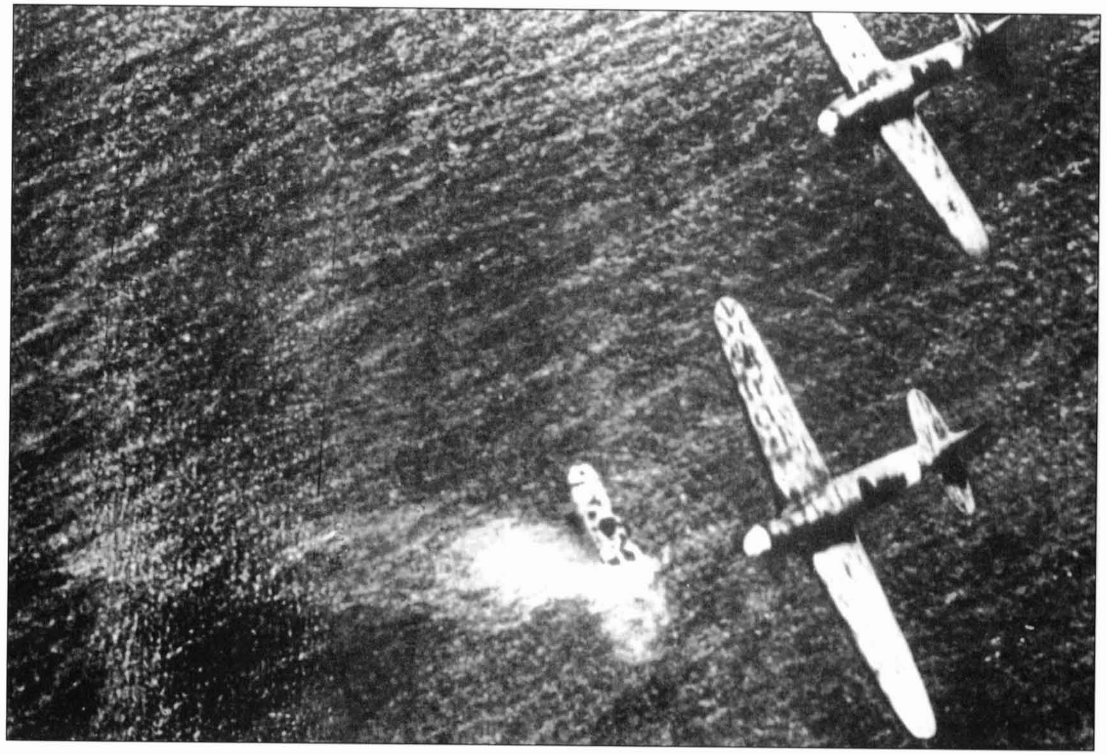


Between 11 and 15 August 1942, 21 C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* took part in the attacks on the Malta-bound *Pedestal* convoy from Decimomannu airfield in Sardinia. In the air battle fought over the convoy on 12 August, 'Ace of Clubs' pilots claimed to have shot down six Sea Hurricanes, with a seventh as a probable, for no loss (*AM*)

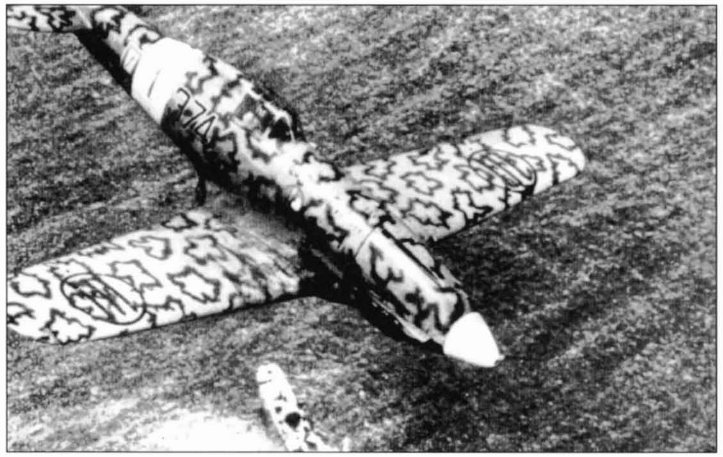
For two of the pilots the flight from Turin-Caselle to Sardinia was an eventful one. A *Folgore* suffered engine trouble at Sarzana airfield, in Liguria, while another was damaged at Pisa airfield whilst taking off for Sardinia. But there was worse to come, for soon after the unit's arrival in Sardinia, Decimomannu airfield was attacked at dusk by nine Beaufighters of No 248 Sqn, led by Wg Cdr J M N Pike. The attackers wrought destruction among the Italian aircraft parked on the ground, and although several C.202s were scrambled to intercept the raiders, the Beaufighters made good their escape.

The following day 14 *Asso di Bastoni Folgores*, led by Maggiore Andrea Favini, set off at 1135 hrs to escort Italian bombers and torpedo-bombers sent to attack the *Pedestal* ships. The Macchis became heavily engaged in combat with British carrier-based fighters, claiming six Sea Hurricanes shot down and one probable. The Fleet Air Arm's

Two C.202s of 153° *Gruppo's* 374ª *Squadriglia* fly over a sinking Allied merchant vessel in the Mediterranean. This photograph was probably taken during the *Pedestal* battles of August 1942 (*AM*)



In another shot from the *Pedestal* period, C.202 374-1, flown by 374ª *Squadriglia's* commanding officer, makes another pass over the sinking merchant ship seen in the photograph on page 83 (*AM*)



800 Naval Air Squadron (NAS) reported the loss of Sea Hurricane V7659, flown by Sub Lt John Lucas, while 885 NAS had the Sea Hurricane flown by Lt Brian Patterson badly damaged during the morning's battle. At 1645 hrs *Asso di Bastoni Gruppo* despatched 14 more *Folgores* but they made no contact with British forces. Three days later, on the 15th, 153° *Gruppo* was ordered back to Caselle.

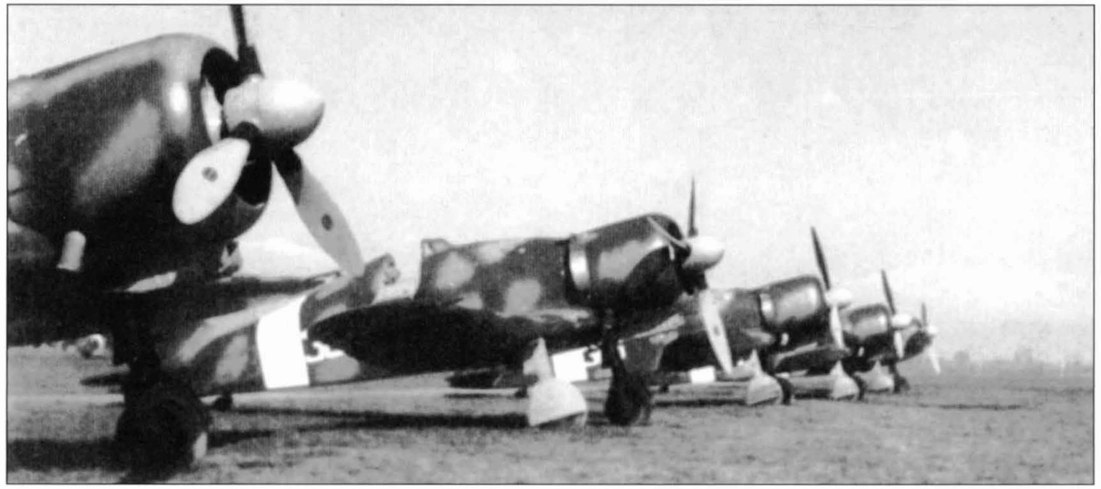
To prepare for the renewed Axis air offensive on Malta, which was intended to neutralise the island's offensive capability and planned for October, 53° *Stormo* HQ, together with 153° *Gruppo* and 35 C.202s, was redeployed to San Pietro di Caltagirone in Sicily. The unit lost the *Folgore* flown by Sergente Maggiore Gino Palombi during the move after it crashed near Naples on 9 September.

The 'Ace of Clubs" pilots would subsequently engage Allied fighters on 14 separate occasions during the Malta offensive, but they were only able to claim three Spitfires destroyed, five probables and several more damaged. While returning from a mission over Malta on 11 October, Tenente Giuliano De Marchi of 372ª *Squadriglia* was forced to bail out of his C.202 due to engine failure. He was duly posted missing.

Two days later, 15 C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* engaged eight Spitfire Vs of No 249 Sqn. Capitano Enzo Radini, CO of 373ª *Squadriglia*, and his wingman Tenente Felice Mezzetti failed to return from this sortie. It is probable that Radini fell victim to Sqn Ldr Mike Stephens (in Spitfire V EP338/A) and Flt Sgt L G C de l'Ara, flying BR565/T. Flt Sgt E T Hiskens (EP135/Z) and Flg Off J F McElroy (EP340/M) each claimed to have shot down a Macchi and a 'Re.2001', so it is possible that one or both of them had accounted for Mezzetti. Radini bailed out and was later picked up six miles southwest of Delimara by rescue launch HSL 128. Flt Lt Wally McLeod of No 1435 Sqn (in BR236/E) also claimed a C.202 shot down. The Italians in return claimed two Spitfires as probables, plus seven others damaged. Wg Cdr 'Teddy' Donaldson's Spitfire V AD529 was damaged and he made a crash-landing at Takali, while Sgt R Miller's aircraft sustained a holed wing and a Spitfire from No 1435 Sqn was also slightly damaged.

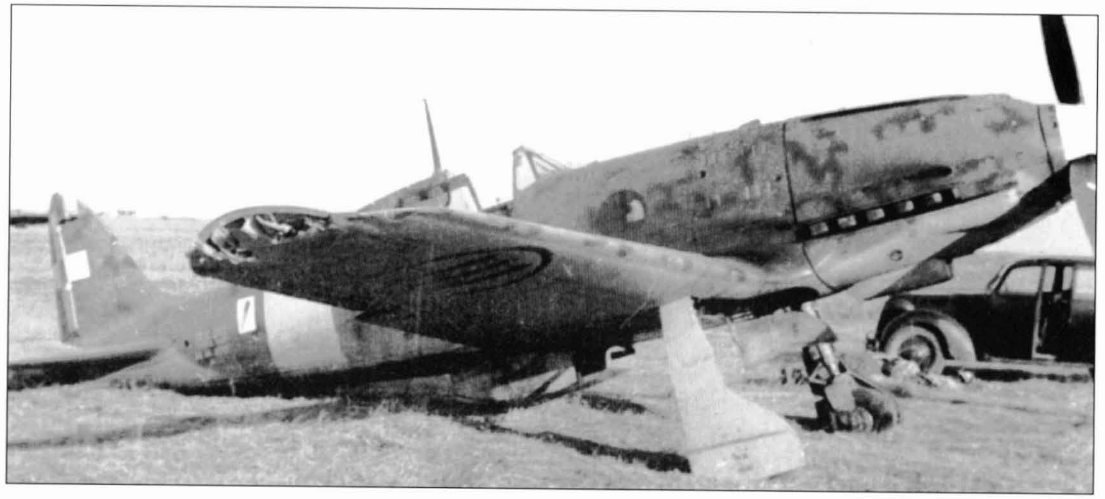
On 25 October 15 C.202s of *Asso di Bastoni* set off at 1435 hrs to provide close escort for three Re.2001s sent to attack Takali – ten C.202s of 51° *Stormo* flew top cover. Over Malta, the Italians engaged Spitfire Vs of No 126 Sqn's 'B' Flight, and Tenente Gianni Rossini of 153° *Gruppo* shared a kill with four 51° *Stormo* pilots. No 126 Sqn reported that Spitfire V BR345/S of Flt Lt W T Rolls had been hit, while BR311/L of New Zealander Sgt Nigel 'Tiger' Park was missing.

'Ace of Swords' G.50s of 151° *Gruppo* are lined up at Turin-Caselle airport, where 53° *Stormo* was reactivated at the beginning of January 1942 (*AM*)

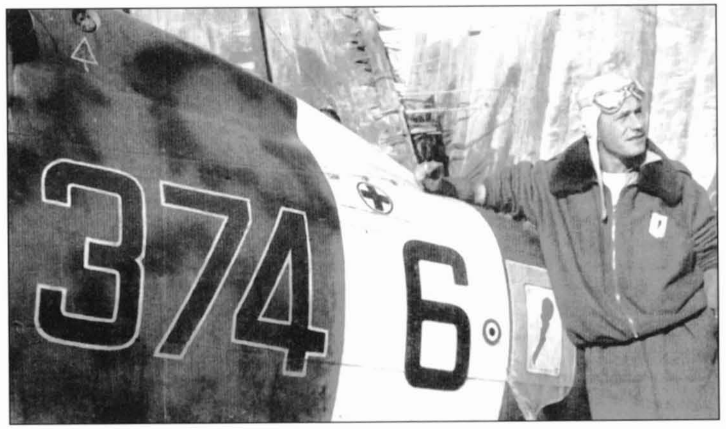


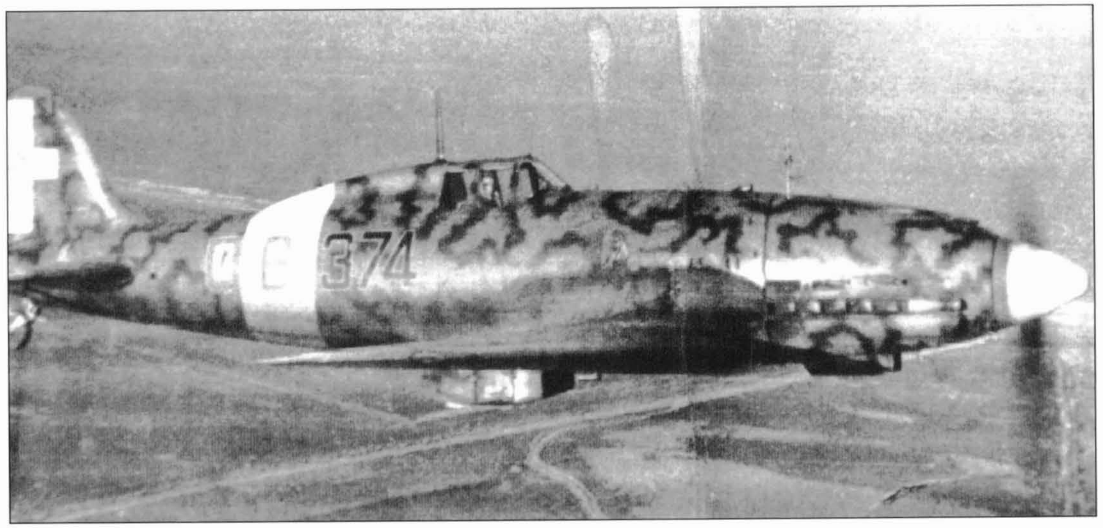
In the first half of October 1942, 153° *Gruppo* was posted to Sicily's San Pietro di Caltagirone airfield to participate in the third, and last, air offensive against Malta. 'Ace of Clubs' pilots are pictured here in front of 153° *Gruppo's* HQ hut (*AM*)

This C.202 of 153° *Gruppo* was photographed in October 1942 at San Pietro di Caltagirone, having returned to base despite suffering damage (note the shot up wingtip) in combat over Malta (*AM*)



This C.202 of 153° *Gruppo*, seen at San Pietro di Caltagirone in October 1942, also returned home despite the attentions of RAF Spitfires based on Malta. Note the small British roundel between the '6' and the *gruppo* emblem that denotes where the fighter was struck by a bullet in combat (*AM*)





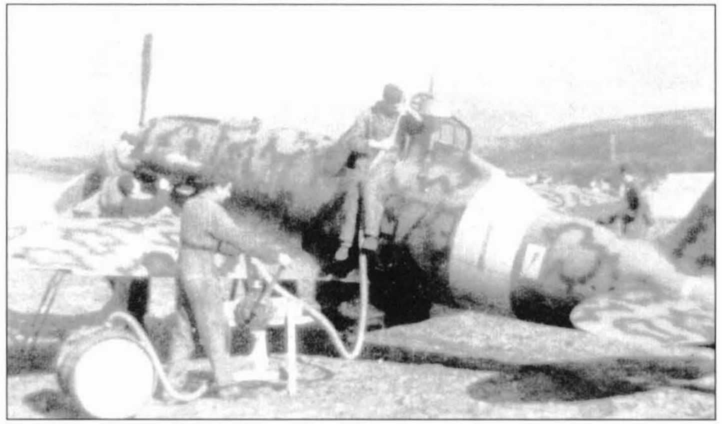
The same machine is seen in flight in October 1942. 153° *Gruppo Folgores* fought bravely over Malta, with 374-6 being repeatedly struck in combat by RAF Spitfires (*Udiente – Taliento collection via Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)

AFTER ALAMEIN AND *TORCH*

From early November 1942, the British victory at El Alamein and the subsequent Allied *Torch* landings in French North Africa marked the turning point in the war in the Mediterranean theatre. By that time the Allies were threatening Italian territory, and 53° *Stormo* found itself engaged beyond its operational capacity. The unit's personnel duly flew patrols over Sicily, interdiction missions over the Maltese channel, bomber escort and fighter protection for Tunisia-bound naval convoys. Its pilots also flew more missions over Malta and Pantelleria, often fighting alongside 150° *Gruppo*, which remained an autonomous unit.

During the hard months between autumn 1942 and summer 1943, the air war over the Mediterranean became even more fierce as the USAAF fielded large formations of four-engined bombers escorted by Spitfires, P-38s and P-40s. This enabled the Allies to achieve overwhelming air supremacy. Indeed, by March 1943, when the balance of power was six-to-one in favour of the Allies, it was not unusual for Axis fighter pilots to engage Allied formations of 50 to 60 aircraft.

On 11 November 151° *Gruppo* moved from the Aegean to Pantelleria following the *Torch* landings – it later transferred to Sicily. In the meantime, 153° *Gruppo*, along with *Stormo* HQ, had moved, first to San Pietro di Caltagirone and Sciacca, in Sicily, then, between 7 and 20 November, it briefly operated with 24 C.202s from Decimomannu. On the 21st, with its strength down to 22 C.202s, 153° *Gruppo* moved yet again, this time back to Sciacca.

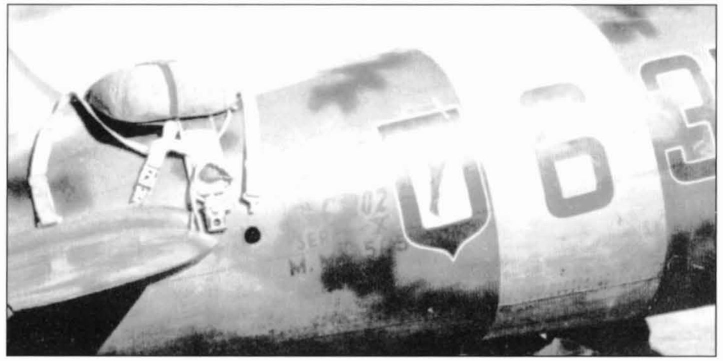


During the Allied *Torch* landings in North Africa, 24 C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* were again deployed to Sardinia's Decimomannu airfield. Here, C.202 373-1 (the personal mount of Capitano Cesare Marchesi, CO of 373ª *Squadriglia*) undergoes maintenance following a bomber escort mission (*AM*)

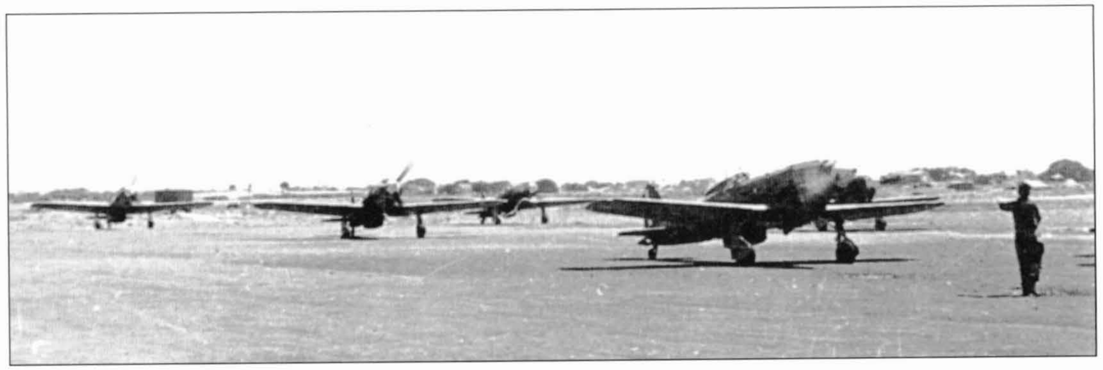
G.50bis of 151° *Gruppo* intercepted a formation of Boston bombers on 16 December, and although the fighters caused no damage to the Allied aircraft, a single Fiat was shot down by heavy anti-aircraft fire from nearby warships. On the way back from this mission, the fighter flown by Sottotenente Antonio Juliano also crashed.

In early January 1943 368ª *Squadriglia*, led by Capitano Mario Ferrero, was posted to Sfax, in Tunisia, and tasked with flying ground attack missions and convoy escort patrols. During the unit's operational tour in Tunisia, its G.50bis carried out numerous bombing and strafing sorties in cooperation with German aircraft, despite poor coordination between the Axis partners. On the 10th, for example, five *Freccias* escorted by seven C.202s of 81ª *Squadriglia* made two attacks (at 0735 hrs and 1045 hrs) on enemy vehicles five miles northwest of Djebel Chirich.

The next day four G.50s attacked Allied units in the Djebel Bellarte area, and on 22 January five Fiat fighter-bombers of 368ª *Squadriglia*, escorted by five C.202s, set off from Sfax at 1210 hrs to attack American vehicles south of Sidi bou Zid. There, they dropped 18 bombs, but heavy anti-aircraft fire brought down G.50bis MM6148 flown by Tenente Furio Lauri. Wounded, he bailed out behind



C.202 373-6 MM9505 was a *Serie X* aircraft, and it was photographed in late 1942 while at readiness at Decimomannu. Note the pilot's parachute harness placed near the aircraft's tail (*AM*)



C.202s of 53° *Stormo* prepare to take off from Sciacca to escort Axis shipping bound for Tunisia (*AM*)

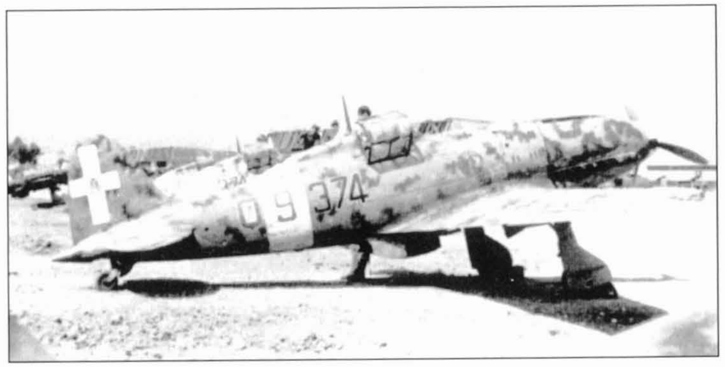
American lines where, helped by Arabs, Lauri managed to return to Axis lines and was later repatriated.

By the beginning of March 368ª *Squadriglia* was down to seven serviceable G.50s. Removed from the Tunisian front, it left Sfax for Pantelleria.

153° *Gruppo*, meanwhile, was continuing to see sporadic action from Sciacca. On 6 January four Spitfire Vs from No 185 Sqn, led by Sqn Ldr Blair White, attacked two C.202s escorting a pair of E-boats ten miles north of Lampedusa island. The Italian fighters were flying at 2000 ft when Flg Off H F Withy (in EP791) fired at one of them, which was seen to lose height rapidly but not to crash. 153° *Gruppo* later reported that a C.202 flown by Sottotente Mario Proserpio of 374ª *Squadriglia* had crashed between Giarre and Riposto during an escort mission. It is not, however, clear whether this was the *Folgore* claimed by Withy. Another pilot was lost to bad weather on 11 January, Sergente Maggiore Secondo Tassinari of 372ª *Squadriglia* failing to return from an escort mission near Cap Bon, in Tunisia.

On 12 February 1943 151° *Gruppo* received its first four C.202 *Folgores*, these being followed at month end by a handful more. By late March, *Asso di Spade* would have nine C.202s and 15 G.50s on strength.

On 5 March, while flying from Sfax to Tunis, a pair of 368ª *Squadriglia* G.50s intercepted a formation of 20 four-engined bombers. The Italians only had time to make one attacking pass before being left behind by the Americans. Two days later, four G.50s of *Asso di Spade* were covering a naval convoy when they reported intercepting 12 P-38s escorting 18 four-engined bombers. Again the *Freccias* had a hard time closing with the bombers, but one did manage to get into an attacking position before being driven off by the escorting P-38s. The Lightnings were probably from the 82nd FG.



On 26 February 1943 374ª *Squadriglia* was posted to Catania airport to join Axis units tasked with air defence duties against the increasing number of Allied air raids over eastern Sicily and Calabria. C.202 374-9 was one of the aircraft that was sent to Catania (*AM*)

Photographed in late 1942, pilots from 373ª *Squadriglia* await the order to take-off from Sciacca airfield as escorts for Axis transport aircraft flying from Castelvetrano to El Alouina, in Tunisia (*AM*)

Almost two weeks later, on 22 March, four C.202s of 151° *Gruppo* and a larger formation of Bf 109Gs from I./JG 53 were escorting Axis shipping when they intercepted an attack by 15 B-26 Marauders of the 17th BG and 38 Lightnings from the 95th and 97th FSs of the 82nd FG. The American fighter pilots subsequently claimed to have destroyed no less than nine Bf 109s, with three more as probables and two damaged, for the loss of three of their number to I./JG 53. The Italians claimed no successes, but lost the 366ª *Squadriglia* Macchi flown by Tenente Vittorio De Martinis, whose aircraft had probably been mistaken for a Bf 109. Two *Asso di Spade Folgores* were on a reconnaissance mission the following day over the sea between La Galite and Bona when they were attacked by 12 Spitfire IXs of No 81 Sqn. In the unequal combat that followed, the New Zealand ace Sqn Ldr Colin Gray sent Sergente Ugo Del Pozzo crashing into the sea.

It was not always enemy action that took a toll of 53° *Stormo* pilots. A shipping escort flown on 31 March, for example, resulted in three pilots falling victim to bad weather. 366ª *Squadriglia* CO Capitano Enrico Londei and Sergente Maggiore Antonio Camerini, both of 151° *Gruppo*, and Sergente Maggiore Manrico Mincuzzi of 153° *Gruppo's* 373ª *Squadriglia* all perished. The weather was no better the next day when Tenente Colonello Bruno Cudugnello, who had been 53° *Stormo* CO since 22 February, was lost while searching for the three missing pilots. He was temporarily replaced as CO by Tenente Colonello Andrea Favini, who in turn made way for Tenente Colonello Ciro Aiello on 16 April.

Ten days earlier, during a naval escort mission, two *Asso di Spade Folgore* pilots intercepted five Boston bombers and claimed a pair of them probably destroyed. Later that same day – and again on 14 April – the C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* shared in the destruction of four B-24s.

ENTER THE Bf 109

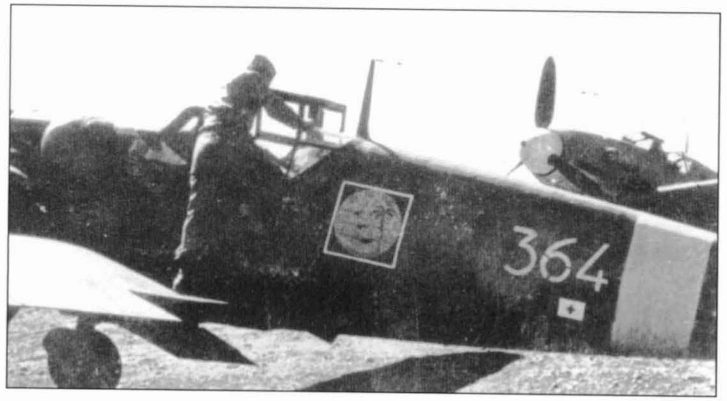
It was also during April 1943 that 150° *Gruppo* became the first unit in the *Regia Aeronautica* to operate German fighters following its re-equipment with Bf 109s. On the 13th the *gruppo* was ordered to Sicily, where it would initially operate from San Pietro di Caltagirone airfield before moving to Sciacca. With a complement of 38 pilots led by Maggiore Antonio Vizzotto, the *gruppo* comprised 363ª, 364ª and 365ª *Squadriglie*. From late April until July all three units were to be fully engaged defending Pantelleria and Sicily against Allied air attacks.

On 17 April 12 Spitfire IXs of No 601 Sqn, together with another dozen Spitfire VIIIs and Vs from No 145 Sqn and No 1 Sqn SAAF, respectively, were escorting Kittyhawks on an armed reconnaissance patrol when they sighted Axis shipping. This force was intercepted by three C.202s of 151° *Gruppo*, which were covering the vessels. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Italians claimed two kills without loss. No 601 Sqn's Flt Sgt P F Griffiths bailed out, while a SAAF fighter was seen spinning down at 1005 hrs, Lt Mundell failing to return.

The Italians continued to lose aircraft and pilots in training accidents. While they were still coming to terms with their new Messerschmitts, four 150° *Gruppo* pilots were killed. One of them was Sottotenente Sgobbi, who was forced to bail out on 23 April when the undercarriage of his Bf 109 would not extend. His parachute failed to open and he was killed.

Shipping escort duties continued, and on 28 April two 53° *Stormo* C.202s were jumped by 19 P-38s from the 82nd FG that were escorting 310th BG B-25s. Sottotenente Vincenzo Graffeo of 367ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo* shot down a P-38, but he was in turn killed by 2Lts James R Gant and Robert W Muir of the 95th FS. The loss of two Lightnings was later acknowledged by the 82nd FG, which reported that 2Lts Howell B Coates of the 96th FS and Ben C Pyle of the 97th FS had been killed.

Maggiore Antonio Vizzotto (the last *Gigi Tre Osei* CO, from October 1941 to September 1943) squats in front of pilots as they pose for the camera in front of a Bf 109G-6 of 150° *Gruppo* at Sciacca airfield in the spring of 1943. Among the standing pilots are Tenente Giosuè Carillo (second from left), Tenente Angelo Zarelli (in the centre, who was killed on 12 June 1943) and Tenente Giovanni Mancini (far right) (*AM*)



During April 1943 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* was re-equipped with Bf 109Gs, which was a welcome development for the increasingly hard-pressed Italian fighter pilots. Two *Gigi Tre Osei* Bf 109G-6s are seen here at readiness on Sciacca airfield (*AM*)

A further attack on Axis shipping was contested by *Asso di Spade* fighters on the 29th when four C.202s intercepted 36 bombers – identified as Bostons – with an escort of P-38s. The ensuing battle saw the Italians firing at two bombers and claiming three Lightnings shot down, plus another as a probable. The Americans reported that two 26-strong P-38 formations from the 97th and 95th FSs of the 82nd FG had been flying anti-shipping missions, and that the 97th's Lightnings were also escorting B-25s. Both USAAF formations engaged Axis fighters to claim a total of eight destroyed, three probables and one damaged for the loss of five P-38s, two from the 97th and three from the 95th FSs. Two other Lightnings from the 95th belly-landed 40 miles east of Algiers.

There was another dogfight on 30 April when seven C.202s of 151° *Gruppo* and five C.205s of 1° *Stormo*, again on naval escort duty, intercepted a formation of fighters identified as P-40s and Spitfires. The Italian pilots fired at several of them and claimed to have shot down a Spitfire and probably destroyed a P-40. It is likely that their opponents were 24 Warhawks of the 79th FG (87th and 316th FSs) which, that afternoon, had sunk the Italian destroyer *Lampo* in the Gulf of Tunis before engaging ten Macchi fighters. The American fighter pilots claimed to have set one of the Macchis on fire and shot down another. This aircraft was probably a C.205 *Veltro* ('Greyhound'), one of which was reported as lost.

The first day of May 1943 saw a formation of four C.202s from 153° *Gruppo* that were escorting Axis ships attacked by 12 Spitfire IXs of No 601 Sqn, which were accompanied by three squadrons of Kittyhawks. In the ensuing dogfight both opponents made claims, although no losses were suffered by either side. Later that same day, 374ª *Squadriglia Folgores* were scrambled from Catania to intercept B-24s returning from a raid over Messina. On 4 May eight C.202s of 151° *Gruppo* again battled with a dozen No 601 Sqn Spitfire IXs and No 239 Wing Kittyhawks near Kelibia. Despite the numbers involved there were again no losses, nor were any claims made.

This was not the case on the morning of the 5th, however, when a major battle took place between *Folgores* and US fighters. Seventeen P-38s of the 95th and 97th FSs had taken off at 0610 hrs as escorts for B-25 Mitchells on a low-level shipping strike. By 0745 hrs the American formation had reached a point 25 miles southwest of Marettimo island

A typical scene at an Axis-held Sicilian airfield during the operation to escort aerial convoys bound for Tunisia. C.202 372-2 of 153° *Gruppo's* 372ª *Squadriglia* runs up its engine, while in the background an SM.82 transport taxies out prior to taking off for Tunisia (*AM*)

when it encountered 16 C.202s of 151° and 153° *Gruppi* escorting four SM.82 transports. There was a wild dogfight which resulted in the Italians shooting down 2Lts Allen E Ellerbee and Edgar L Weedle of the 95th, as well as 2Lt Robert E Beatty of the 97th. However, the remaining 95th FS pilots accounted for all four SM.82s. One was shot down, two crash-landed in the sea and the fourth made a forced-landing in the Ras el Fortes area. The Italian fighter pilots also reported attacking three bombers, which they identified as 'Bostons', although they were more likely to have been Mitchells.

There were further claims by Italian pilots two days later when the C.202s of 374ª *Squadriglia* were scrambled from Catania along with C.205s of 1° *Stormo*. Intercepting a 150-strong formation of Liberator bombers, the pilots claimed to have shot down three and damaged several others.

BATTLES OVER PANTELLERIA AND SICILY

The collapse of Axis resistance in Tunisia in early May 1943 signalled the end of the North African campaign, and Allied leaders turned their attention to Italian bases in the Pelagie islands of Pantelleria, Lampedusa, Lampione and Linosa, located halfway between Tunisia and Sicily. The biggest of these islands, Pantelleria, was defended by a 12,000-strong garrison, 100+ coastal guns and anti-aircraft weapons. Pantelleria also boasted a harbour and an airfield with a long runway and a large, well-protected underground hangar capable of housing 50 aircraft. In addition there were two powerful German-manned radar installations. Pantelleria, therefore, represented a threat to the Allied forces poised to invade Sicily. It had to be neutralised. Before launching Operation *Corkscrew* a series of air raids was launched to precede a landing on the island.

The first air attacks on Pantelleria came on 8 May 1943 when 150 Allied aircraft dropped bombs and strafed the island's airfield. At around 1000 hrs, 108 Baltimore and Boston bombers of Nos 232 and 3 Wings SAAF, followed by 120 USAAF B-25 Mitchells and 13 bomb-carrying P-38s of 82nd FG, targeted aircraft parked on the base. Having been alerted by the island's *Freya* radar station, six C.202s were scrambled just in time to intercept the raiders.

A pilot and a groundcrewman photographed respectively inside the cockpit and sitting on the port wing of a *Folgore*. The pilot had to endure poor visibility from the cockpit when taxiing in the C.202, so a groundcrewman would routinely guide him to the runway threshold whilst sitting in this position on the fighter's left or right wingtip (*AM via Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)

In a one-sided battle the handful of Italian fighters engaged 228 Allied bombers and their escorting fighters. A single C.202 attacked the Baltimores of No 223 Sqn after they had completed their bomb run, twice passing in front of the bombers' fixed forward-firing guns. Sqn Ldr Leon, piloting the lead Baltimore, fired two short bursts and observed strikes on the Italian aircraft. The Macchi then attempted a port quarter attack, but in the process was hit by one of the gunners, who claimed to have damaged the Italian fighter. The pilots of the escorting Spitfires later confirmed that the C.202 had crashed, but not before its pilot had damaged two Baltimores from No 21 Sqn SAAF. One of them later crash-landed at Monastir with both gunners wounded and one engine out of action. The Italian pilots also claimed to have damaged a Spitfire and to have downed a P-40 Warhawk.

But even if the Italians reported that little damage had been done to the airfield, the attackers did exact a toll. They not only destroyed an SM.79 bomber and damaged some C.202s, they also set fire to 450 fuel drums. The Americans considered that the dive-bombing attacks by the P-38s had been particularly effective.

While the raids on Pantelleria were still in progress four bomb-carrying Beaufighters of No 272 Sqn set off at 1025 hrs on a sweep of the area between Cap Bon, in Tunisia, and Malta. Three hours later the aircraft had reached a position southeast of Cape Granitola, near Sicily's western tip, when they were jumped by two C.202s. Eight other Italian fighters duly crossed the Sicilian coast to join a combat which was to prove costly to the RAF. The Beaufighter crewed by Plt Off D W Frazer and Sgt

Wearing their flying suits and parachutes, these 'Ace of Clubs' pilots are ready for their next escort mission in the spring of 1943 (*AM via Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)

J Steele was shot down and exploded when it hit the sea. Another machine, crewed by Plt Off R Cossette and Sgt R Fletcher, tried to evade the eight C.202s now pursuing it but this aircraft was also downed, sending up a huge column of water when it hit the sea. The remaining two Beaufighters managed to evade several attacks, with Wg Cdr Buchanan's observer, Flg Off Thynne, claiming to have damaged a Macchi with fire from his Vickers gun.

The events of 8 May represented just the beginning for the Axis powers in the region, for over the next three days the Allies launched attacks on Sicily. On the 9th, USAAF aircraft marked the start of the pre-invasion air offensive with a heavy raid involving 211 aircraft. That day, Sicilian-based Italian fighters flew 46 sorties to break up the raiding formations. At 1100 hrs 18 C.202s of 374ª *Squadriglia* and C.205s of 1° *Stormo* attacked a strongly-escorted formation of B-24s attacking Messina and claimed two probable kills. One Liberator was seen to ditch in the sea, while another was observed trailing smoke after an attack by a single Catania-based C.202. Later, four other *Asso di Bastoni Folgores* took off from Sciacca and caught a formation of 250 escorted B-24s over Marsala, but the pilots involved were only able to claim that they fired at four of them.

11 May was to be another hard day for the Sicily-based Axis fighter pilots. The Italians reported flying 55 sorties, and *Regia Aeronautica* and Luftwaffe pilots together claimed to have shot down eight Allied aircraft. The *Folgores* of 374ª *Squadriglia* were scrambled from Catania to intercept two formations of Liberators, eight of which were claimed to have been attacked. Tenente Vittorio Satta made three passes on a B-24 in the first formation, firing a total of 280 rounds. On the British side, 11 escorting Spitfire IXs from No 1435 Sqn engaged four Bf 109s and six C.202s, one of which shot down Flg Off Ron B Martin.

Two days later the Italian fighter pilots flew 25 sorties in the defence of Sicily and claimed to have shot down one Allied aircraft. Several C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* also engaged Liberators near Palermo and over Augusta. Then, much to the surprise of the defenders, there were four days of absolute quiet. This enabled 151° *Gruppo's* C.202s to be transferred from Pantelleria to Sciacca on the 15th to join 153° *Gruppo* – a move caused by Pantelleria airfield becoming unusable due to Allied attacks, although four *Folgores* were left behind. Between 19 and 21 May 153° *Gruppo* HQ left Sciacca airfield, together with its 372ª and 373ª *Squadriglie*, these units being redeployed to Trapani-Chinisia on Sicily's extreme western tip. Meanwhile, one section of 153° *Gruppo* was based at Palermo-Boccadifalco to defend Pantelleria and western Sicily, although 374ª *Squadriglia* remained at Catania, where it had been based since 26 February.

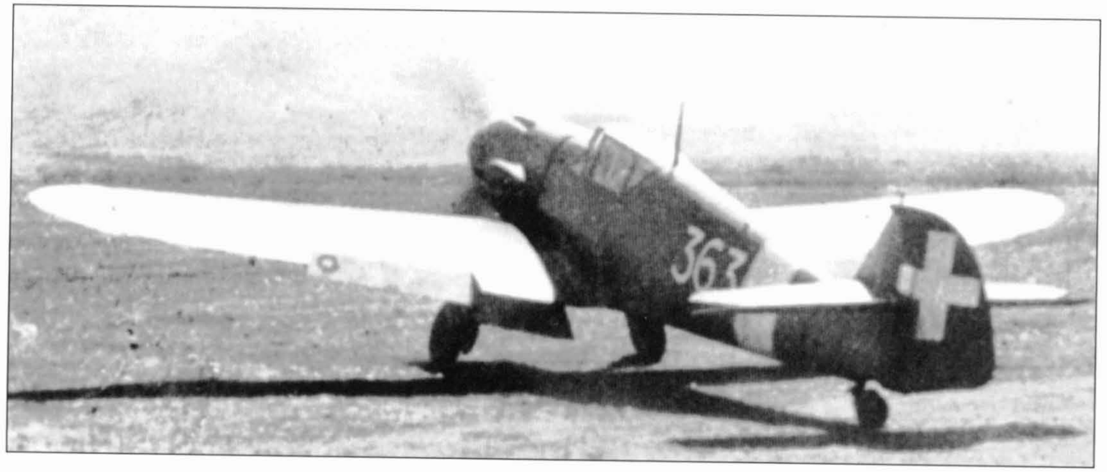
C.202s of 53° *Stormo* taxi out from their dispersal area at Chinisia airfield in the summer of 1943 (*AM*)

Pilots of 151° *Gruppo Asso di Spade* relax with a game of bowls while at readiness at Palermo airport (*AM*)

Allied air attacks on Pantelleria were resumed with a vengeance on 18 May, five days after the surrender of Axis forces in Tunisia. Waves of Allied bombers swarmed over the island between 1140 hrs and 1330 hrs, bombing the airfield and the harbour. Much damage was caused and local inhabitants suffered many fatalities. The bombers were back at 1630 hrs when eight aircraft attacked other targets. The four C.202s of the remaining 151° *Gruppo* section received a delayed radar warning and were scrambled too late to intercept the raiders, as were the Sicily-based fighters, which failed to catch the bombers on their return journey.

Next day it was Sicily's turn to be attacked, with key targets being repeatedly mauled. In an attempt to repulse the raiders Italian fighter

A Bf 109F-4 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo Gigi Tre Osei* prepares to take-off from Sciacca airfield in May 1943 (*AM*)



pilots flew 64 sorties but only claimed to have shot down one of the attackers. On the 19th six Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo* and seven C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* were scrambled from Sciacca and Chinisia to engage a formation of B-17s escorted by 12 P-38s from the 49th FS/14th FG. The attackers, heading for Trapani-Milo airfield, were intercepted over Marsala. The Messerschmitt and Macchi pilots claimed to have downed a P-38, with two more probables and 16 B-17s damaged. The Americans admitted losing the Lightnings of 1Lts Frank C Hawk and John L Wolford, who were listed as missing in action near Trapani. The latter was a 1st FG veteran who had been transferred to the 14th FG to give its pilots the benefit of his experience. Wolford was leading two damaged P-38s away from the combat area when he was jumped by the Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo*. He had just turned back to engage the Italians when he was shot down.

21 May proved to be a hard day for both Sicily and Pantelleria. The latter was attacked by some 50 Allied bombers that swept over the island between 1020 hrs and 1140 hrs. Another raid began at 1420 hrs, during which both the harbour and the airfield were attacked. A major success for the Allies was the destruction of the vital *Wurzburg* D radar station. Many German servicemen were also killed.

Italian fighters were scrambled and became engaged in three dogfights, their pilots claiming to have shot down three enemy aircraft. Over Sicily 11 Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo* intercepted a formation of B-17s escorted by P-38s of the 49th FS/14th FG over Sciacca. The Italian pilots fired at three bombers and five P-38s, expending a total of 1061 rounds of ammunition. Four C.202 pilots of 153° *Gruppo* from Chinisia claimed that one P-38 had crashed 19 miles south of Cape Feto. B-17 gunners, however, claimed to have downed four enemy fighters, while the 14th FG reported scoring three kills, these being credited to Capt Bernard R Muldoon and Maj Herb Ross of the 48th FS and 1Lt Wallace G Bland of the 49th FS. On the debit side, the 49th lost two P-38s, 1Lt Albert Little being posted as missing and 2Lt Burton J Snyder captured.

On the 24th C.202s of 374ª *Squadriglia* were scrambled to engage a large formation of B-24s attacking Reggio Calabria. The *Folgore* pilots, among them Tenente Vittorio Satta, attacked the bombers and claimed to have damaged three Liberators. The next day was a better one for the Italian fighter command in Sicily, whose aircraft flew a total of 113 sorties – the highest daily total of the entire Sicilian campaign. Italian pilots also made the greatest number of claims of the campaign, with a total of 13 enemy aircraft being credited to them.

'Ace of Clubs' pilots relax in front of the 372ª *Squadriglia* HQ hut at Trapani-Chinisia airfield in the summer of 1943 (*AM*)

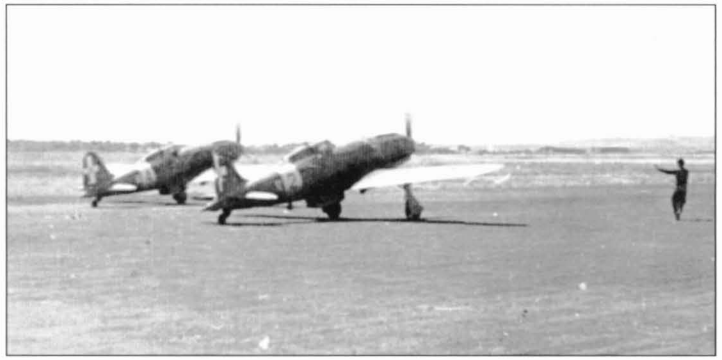
Colonello Angelo Tessore was appointed AOC, Sicily Fighter Command on 6 February 1942. He is seen here with two 'Ace of Clubs' fighter pilots during a visit to 53° *Stormo's* 153° *Gruppo* (*AM*)

The action started with C.202s from 374ª *Squadriglia* jumping a strong formation of B-24s over Messina. Tenente Vittorio Satta and Sergente Ricotti shared in the destruction of a Liberator, but return fire from the American bombers hit Satta's Macchi. Later, four *Folgores* of 151° *Gruppo* intercepted a formation of P-38s near Palermo and claimed to have shot down one of them. That day the 14th FG reported losing two Lightnings, with one falling to flak and the other being lost over Tunisia.

Asso di Bastoni Folgores were scrambled several times from Catania on 26 May to counter large formations of bombers heading for Messina. During these encounters Axis fighter pilots reported scoring 14 kills, with five more Allied aircraft claimed as downed by flak.

The bombing offensive against Sicily resumed on the 28th – a day when Italian fighter pilots flew 56 sorties alongside their compatriots from the Luftwaffe. They claimed to have shot down seven Allied aircraft for the loss of two fighters, one Italian and one German. Eight Bf 109Gs of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo* had already taken off from Sciacca at 1740 hrs in response to an Allied attack on Castelvetrano airfield when there was a radar warning of two further formations approaching Trapani. In fact, medium bombers of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force were on their way to attack the airfields of Sciacca, Castelvetrano, Trapani-Milo and Borizzo.

Between Castelvetrano and Marsala the eight Bf 109s engaged four Spitfires, probably from the 31st FG, as well as P-38s from the 14th FG that were escorting nine bombers. When the Italian pilots returned to base at 1840 hrs they claimed to have shot down two Spitfires and attacked a P-38. Severely damaged Bf 109G-6 365-7 had to make a forced-landing near Gibellina, however, although pilot Tenente Eugenio Lecchi, who, together with Tenente Giosuè Carillo, had engaged two Spitfires, was unhurt. The 14th FG claimed two Bf 109s shot down, these being credited to Capt Robert R 'Bob' McCord and Lt Sidney W Weatherford of the 48th FG. Capt Charles J 'Charley'



A groundcrewman guides a pair of 153° *Gruppo* C.202s to their take-off point on Chinisia's runway in the summer of 1943 (*AM*)

Tenente Fausto Filippi is pictured during his service with 2ª *Squadriglia* of 2° *Gruppo* ANR in 1944-45. He had previously flown with 150° *Gruppo's* 364ª *Squadriglia* prior to the September 1943 armistice. Credited with a total of eight kills, Filippi lost his life on 23 January 1945 when he was shot down in combat with Spitfires of No 417 Sqn RCAF (*Nino Arena*)

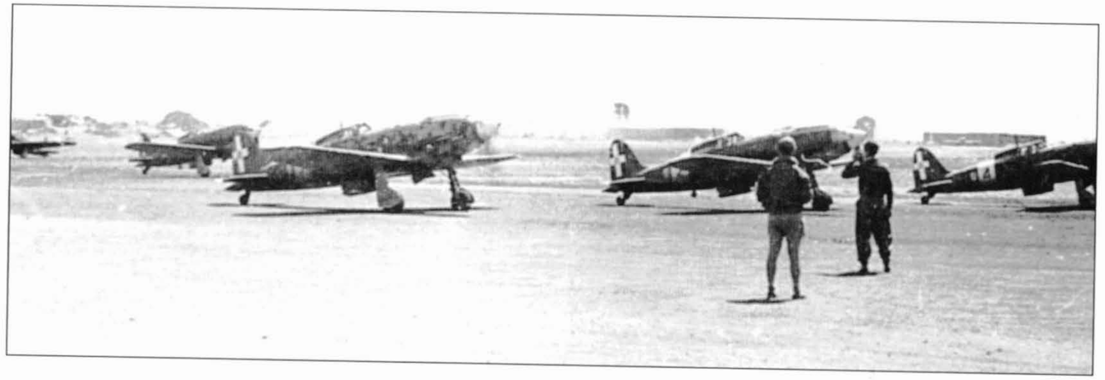
Crocker, 1Lt Richard A Campbell and Capt Sam L Palmer of the 37th FS and 2Lt Daniel D Africa of the 48th FS claimed further Bf 109s as either probables or damaged. The 48th's 2Lt H E Simmons failed to return, being reported as missing in action near Pantelleria.

On 30 May, as the Allied bombers continued to pound Sicily, the Italian fighter pilots flew 27 sorties, but they were engaged in only one dogfight in which they claimed to have shot down an enemy aircraft. Later, ten C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* attacked a formation of B-24s over Palermo. They made 30 firing passes on 11 of the Liberators but claimed to have shot down an escorting Spitfire, with two P-38s as probables. A further 25 sorties were flown by Axis fighter pilots the following day. On 1 June *Gigi Tre Osei* mourned the loss of another of its pilots when Sergente Fausto Meaglia of 364ª *Squadriglia* crashed his Bf 109 while taking off after receiving the order to scramble.

With the German radar installations on Pantelleria out of action and the airfield's runway unserviceable, the Italian High Command ordered the four remaining C.202s of 151° *Gruppo* to move to Sicily on 4 June. The fighters had escaped destruction in the Allied air raids because they had been sheltered inside the huge underground hangar. That day Italian fighter pilots flew 51 sorties over Sicily and claimed an enemy aircraft destroyed. This came when 11 C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* were ordered up from Chinisia to intercept P-38s approaching Trapani-Milo airfield. One kill and two probables were awarded as a result. The P-38s had probably been from the 14th FG, which reported the loss of two 49th FS pilots over western Sicily after they had collided while avoiding flak bursts. Both pilots, 1Lt John H Green and 2Lt William A Bergersen, were killed.

The intensity of the air attacks on Pantelleria was stepped up as the Allies reported dropping 4100 tons of bombs by 10 June. There were 250 raids on the 6th when the village of Campobello suffered severely, as did a coastal battery at Karuscia Point, the airfield and the harbour. That same day 21 C.202s of 151° and 153° *Gruppi* escorted four C.200 fighter-bombers of 3° *Gruppo* searching for Allied shipping between Cap Bon and Pantelleria, but no vessels were sighted.

On the 8th there were 16 attacks mounted by 400 Allied bombers, which struck the airfield, the harbour and the landing area scheduled for the invasion. In Sicily, the *Comando Aeronautica* made a big effort to muster 96 fighters and eight fighter-bombers, of which 29 were airborne between 1050 hrs and 1320 hrs, while at 1330 hrs four aircraft carried out a reconnaissance mission. Two Bf 109s of *Gigi Tre Osei* and two C.205 *Veltros* of 1° *Stormo Caccia* confirmed the presence of warships near Pantelleria, so at 1340 hrs eight C.200s fighter-bombers of 3° *Gruppo* laden with 50 kg bombs took off from Castelvetrano to attack the British warships. Flying close escort were 22 C.202s of 151° and 153° *Gruppi*, with four Bf 109s of 150° *Gruppo* providing top cover. The C.200s dive-bombed the ships, claiming that one bomb had probably found its mark, although without inflicting significant damage.

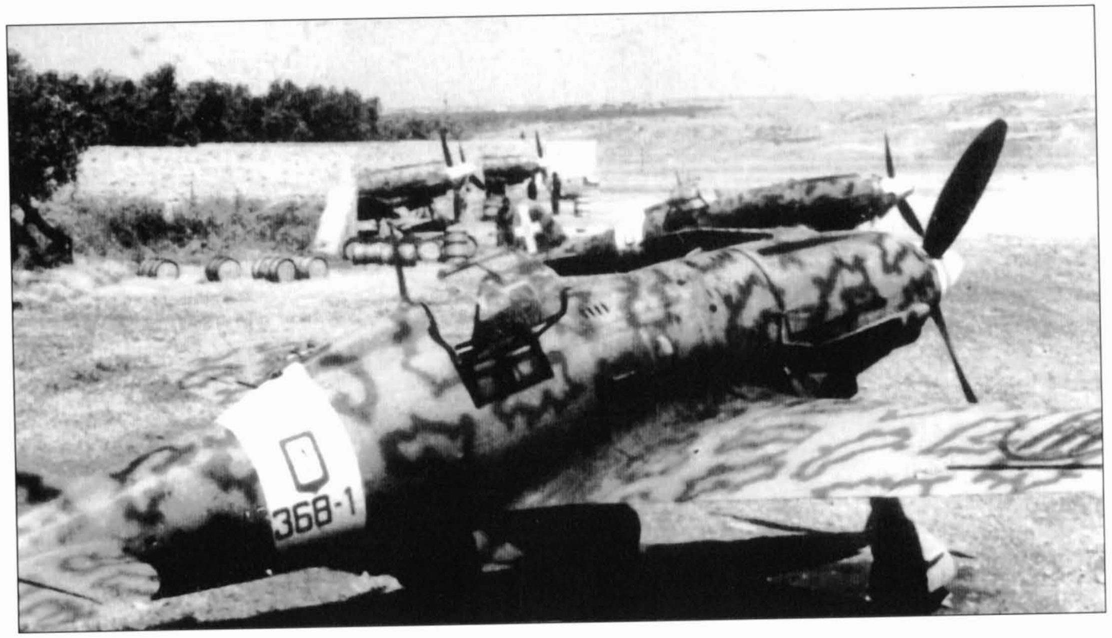


A busy scene at Chinisia airfield in the summer of 1943, with a formation of 'Ace of Clubs' C.202s just about to take off to intercept a massive Allied bomber formation heading for Pantelleria (*AM*)

Meanwhile, a strong force of about 50 American Spitfires from the 52nd FG had been circling overhead. Now they joined in the battle, and in the subsequent dogfight the pilots of 53° *Stormo* claimed to have downed one Spitfire and damaged four others. The Americans not only denied this but claimed to have shot down one of the Italian fighters in return, Lt Morris Dodd of the 5th FS/52nd FG targeting the C.200 of 3° *Gruppo* pilot Tenente Attilio Grignani, which plunged into the sea west of Pantelleria. According to another source, Grignani had actually fallen victim to 'friendly fire' from the Bf 109s of *Gigi Tre Osei*, which mistook the fighter-bomber for a Spitfire.

The *Regia Aeronautica* mounted another big effort over Pantelleria on 8 June. At 1815 hrs a 40-strong Italian formation set off on a *caccia libera* (free chase) mission in the Pantelleria area. It comprised six Bf 109Gs from 150° *Gruppo*, together with 11 C.205Vs of 1° *Stormo's* 6° *Gruppo* and 23 C.202s of 151° and 153° *Gruppi*. They engaged American Spitfires and P-38s that were escorting bombers. The Italians claimed to have shot down six Spitfires and a P-38 into the sea, together with four other Spitfires as probably destroyed and a further 22 Allied fighters damaged.

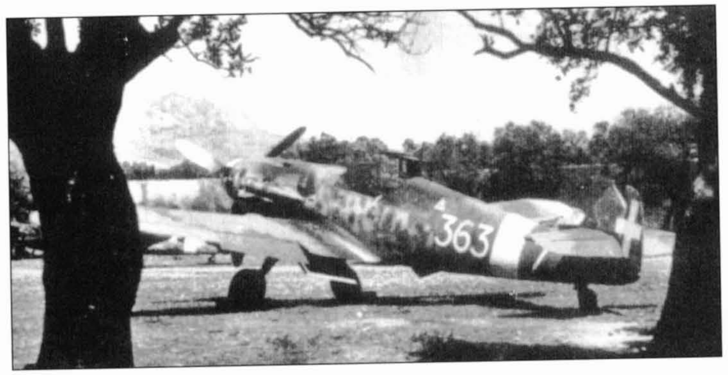
The aircraft identified as Spitfires were probably P-40s from the 79th FG, whose 86th (escorting Boston bombers) and 85th FSs both reported engaging Bf 109s and C.202s. For the 85th, Lts Milton 'Milt' Clark, William Ryburn and Capt John Cimaglia each claimed a Bf 109, while Cimaglia and Lts Charles 'Kim' Bolack and John Martin also reported downing a C.202 apiece. A Bf 109 probable and another damaged were claimed by Lts John 'General' Hoagland and William 'Bill' Abbot, while Maj Tarleton H 'Jack' Watkins, flying with the 86th, claimed to have damaged a Macchi. The Americans, who reported suffering no losses in these combats, succeeded in shooting down two 53° *Stormo* C.202s flown by Capitano Mario Ferrero (368ª *Squadriglia* CO) and Maresciallo Elio Cesari. Two other Macchis were seriously damaged but were still able to return to base.



Devastating Allied bombing raids on Pantelleria in mid-May 1943 forced the C.202s of 151° *Gruppo* to join 53° *Stormo* in Sicily. *Folgore* 368-1 MM91956 was the personal mount of 368ª *Squadriglia* CO, Capitano Mario Ferrero. It was photographed here at readiness parked alongside other Macchis. On 8 June 1943 Ferrero was killed in action near Pantelleria, command of 368ª *Squadriglia* passing to Capitano Fioravante Ruffinato (*AM*)

There was no respite for the defenders of Pantelleria and Sicily on 9 June. Italian fighter pilots flew 47 sorties over Sicily but lost two aircraft, while a further 24 sorties were made over Pantelleria. All these sorties were preceded between 0900 hrs and 1030 hrs by reconnaissance flights by two C.202s. During the course of the day 550 Allied aircraft made 19 attacks on the island. In the morning a Spitfire of the 308th FS/31st FG, piloted by 1Lt McMann, was brought down near Pantelleria by Bf 109G 363-7 flown by Tenente Ugo Drago, CO of 150° *Gruppo's* 363ª *Squadriglia*. A rescue mission was mounted by 31st FG pilots, who went out to search for their squadronmate, and he was later picked up by an Allied rescue craft.

Between 1015 hrs and 1140 hrs, four Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo* and 14 C.202s of 53° *Stormo* set off on a *caccia libera* mission over Pantelleria. Near the coast the Italian fighter pilots sighted an American formation of about 50 P-38s and Spitfires, which were promptly engaged. The Lightnings had probably come from the 1st FG, while the Spitfires may have been those searching for the downed McMann. The Italian pilots claimed to have shot down four Spitfires, with four more as probables (one credited to Tenente Fornoncini) and 14 others damaged (two to Tenente Fornoncini). Of the four Spitfires reported to have been downed, one was claimed by Tenente Ugo Drago and another by Tenente Giovanni Chiale (although this is not noted in his flight book). The other two were jointly credited to 374ª *Squadriglia* pilots, who claimed to have attacked 11 Spitfires.



Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18421 363-7 was flown by 17-kill ace Tenente Ugo Drago, CO of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*. This photograph was taken at Sciacca airfield in the summer of 1943 (*AM*)

A pair of C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* scramble from Chinisia airfield during the hot Sicilian summer of 1943 (*AM*)

Pilots of the 31st FG reported that in a 20-minute battle they had downed four C.202s and one Bf 109 for no loss. Formation leader Capt Thomas B Fleming and 1Lts Ed Dalrymple, Royal N Baker, Walter J Overend and Merritt C Wolfe each claimed a kill, but only two C.202s from 53° *Stormo*, piloted by Capitano Veronesi and Sottotenente Antonio Crabbia, had actually been shot down. So too had Bf 109G 363-7 of 150° *Gruppo's* Tenente Ugo Drago. The three pilots all bailed out safely before being picked up and taken to Pantelleria. In one of the last night flights from the besieged island, an SM.81 trimotor returned them to Palermo.

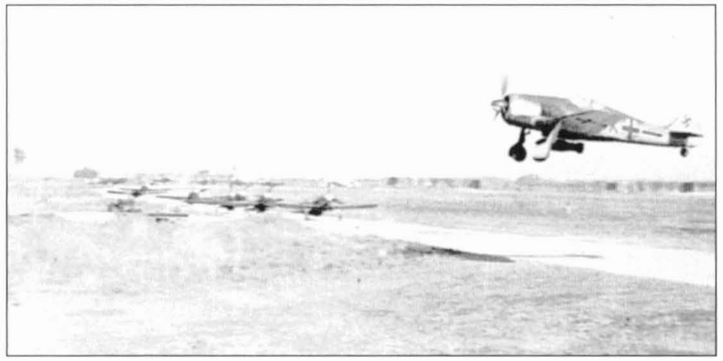
The fighter pilots celebrated the third anniversary of their country's entry into the war on 10 June by fighting two tough battles as the air offensive against Pantelleria reached its peak – the Allies mounted 19 raids with nearly 550 aircraft. The B-25s of the 12th and 340th BGs were escorted by fighters, which also made dive-bombing attacks. Fighters and light, medium and heavy bombers kept up the tempo of attacks on the island throughout the day. Between 0825 hrs and 1230 hrs more than 1000 sorties were flown, with 1500+ tons of high-explosive bombs dropped.

At 1500 hrs a formation of 24 Italian fighters, comprising six Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo*, nine C.202s of 151° *Gruppo* and nine C.202s of 153° *Gruppo*, took off for a sweep around Pantelleria. Once over the island, the Italian fighter pilots intercepted a formation of Allied bombers escorted by Spitfires. In the swirling combat that followed the Italians claimed to have downed five Spitfires and two bombers, with four other Spitfires as probables, without suffering any losses. It is probable that the Spitfires were from the 31st FG, which reported scoring five kills during the morning. II./JG 27 lost nine Bf 109G-6s and their pilots to the Spitfires of the 307th FS/31st FG and P-40s of the 325th FG.

There was another air battle fought near Pantelleria that evening when 30 Italian fighters took off at 1900 hrs. The formation comprised six Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo*, eight C.202s of 151° *Gruppo*, ten more *Folgores* from 153° *Gruppo* and six C.202s of 161° *Gruppo*. Pilots reported encountering both medium and heavy bombers escorted by fighters, and they engaged Spitfires from the 31st FG and P-40 Warhawks of the 85th and 87th FSs of the 79th FG. The combat opened with Lts Joseph Connelly and John Martin of the 85th FS sharing in the destruction of a C.202. Five minutes later it was the turn of the 87th FS, whose pilots reported downing three C.202 stragglers that had possibly come from 161° *Gruppo*. The unit also claimed a further 12 Axis fighters destroyed, the latter being engaged while escorting a Cant Z.506S seaplane of 8ª *Squadriglia Sezione Soccorso* (rescue section) that had left Marsala-Stagnone seaplane base at 1820 hrs. The seaplane was forced to ditch, with one crewmember slightly injured, but it was later able to return to its base after the crew had repaired the damage.

Lt Paul G McArthur of the 87th FS claimed four kills (two Bf 109s and two C.202s), plus another C.202 damaged, but was then himself hit and forced to bail out. He was picked up later by a Walrus from No 283 Sqn. Lt Wyman D 'Porky' Anderson claimed two C.202s and one Bf 109 destroyed, while seven other kills were credited to 87th FS pilots Capts Frank M Huff and Lee V Gossick, 2Lt John Kirsch and Lts Morris Watkins, Kensley Miller, Asa Adair and Leo Berinati. Lt Col Charles E Grogan reported slight damage to his P-40 after colliding with a Bf 109. He had actually hit a C.202, which lost a wing and crashed into the sea. The 87th FS claimed 15 kills overall.

From 8 May to 11 June 1943, when Pantelleria surrendered, Axis fighters and fighter-bombers conducted a fierce battle with Allied air and naval forces. In this photograph a C.202 of 53° *Stormo*, severely damaged in combat over the island, has managed to belly-land at its base at Chinisia. In the background can be seen three Fw 190s just taking off, bound for Pantelleria (*AM*)



C.202s of 53° *Stormo* taxi out from their dispersal area at Trapani-Chinisia airfield prior to escorting Axis fighter-bombers attacking Allied shipping around the besieged island of Pantelleria. In the foreground, a bomb-laden Fw 190A takes off on yet another mission in defence of Pantelleria. During early June 1943, Fw 190A-4/U8-equipped *Stab Schlachtgeschwader* 2 was based at Trapani for the final stages of the battle for Pantelleria (*AM*)

The 31st FG also enjoyed success, its pilots being credited with seven Italian fighters destroyed for the loss of one 307th FS Spitfire. The pilot of this aircraft, 1Lt George Gooding, was killed when his fighter was apparently attacked by a P-40 of the 99th FS, which had been temporarily attached to the 33rd FG. Among the scorers from the 309th FS/31st FG, six pilots each claimed to have shot down a Macchi. They were Maj Frank A Hill, Capts Berry Chandler and Carl W Payne, 1Lts Robert O Rahn, Donald J Keith and Dale E Shafer Jr (who was also attacked in error by a P-40). In addition, 1Lt James R Swiger claimed a Bf 109 as shot down, 2Lt Leonard H Meldeau an Fw 190 as a probable and Capt John H Paulk a Bf 109 damaged.

The Italians had actually lost seven C.202s, four from 53° *Stormo* and three from 161° *Gruppo*. Of the four 53° *Stormo* pilots shot down, three were from 151° *Gruppo*, namely its CO, Capitano Domenico Bevilacqua, and Sergente Rino Nava of 366ª *Squadriglia* and Tenente Giancarlo Celle of 367ª *Squadriglia*. 153° *Gruppo* also lost Maresciallo Paolo Franchi of 373ª *Squadriglia*. The three downed 161° *Gruppo* pilots were Tenente Giuseppe Marazio and Maresciallo Giuseppe Ravasio (both of 164ª *Squadriglia*) and Sottotenente Iolando Soprani of 159ª *Squadriglia*. Despite these losses, 53° *Stormo* pilots reported shooting down a B-24, a Boston and two Spitfires, as well as damaging five Bostons and one P-38. Of this score, 374ª *Squadriglia* pilots (among them Tenente Vittorio Satta) accounted for one Boston shot down and claimed to have attacked five others.

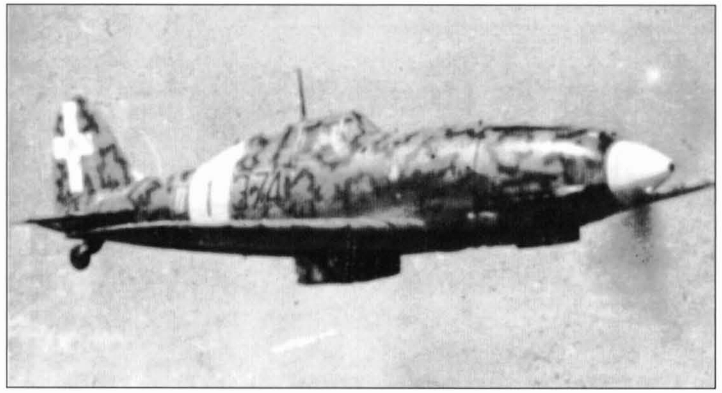
On 11 June seven Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo* and nine C.202s of 53° *Stormo* escorted nine C.200s of 3° *Gruppo* that attacked the invasion fleet alongside Luftwaffe Fw 190s. No losses were reported by the Italians during this mission. Over Sicily, meanwhile, four C.202s of 374ª *Squadriglia* were scrambled from Catania and joined by aircraft from 1° *Stormo* in an attack on four-engined bombers.

That same day the garrison at Pantelleria surrendered to the Allies without a fight. The island fortress had been neutralised by air power alone, allowing the troops of the British 1st Division to wade ashore practically unopposed. During the air battle for Pantelleria, the Allies had dropped 6570 tons of bombs on the island. Between 8 and 10 June, 53° *Stormo* had lost eight C.202s of 151° and 153° *Gruppi*, together with a Bf 109G of 150° *Gruppo* (flown by Tenente Ugo Drago), three C.202s from 161° *Gruppo* and one C.200 from 3° *Gruppo* as a result of enemy action.

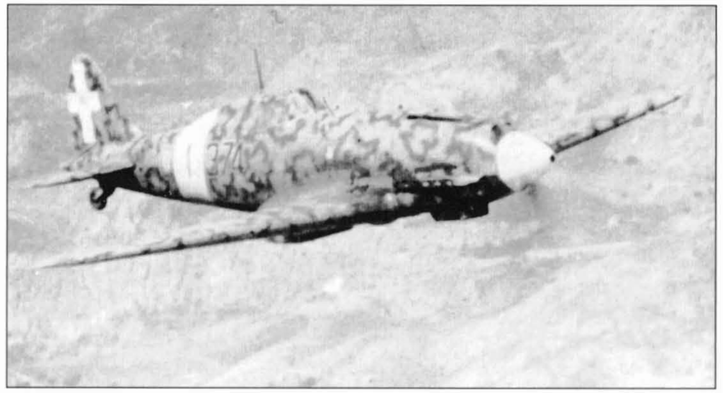
THE LAST BATTLES

With the surrender of Pantelleria, the way to Sicily lay open to the Allies. As was becoming customary, the invasion of the island was preceded by a massive air offensive intended to soften up the Axis defences. The collapse of Pantelleria, therefore, meant no slackening in the air battles fought by Italian fighter pilots. Nor did it lift the ever-present threat of danger from other causes. This was underlined by *Gigi Tre Osei Gruppo's* loss of yet another pilot in a flying accident on 12 June 1943, Tenente Angelo Zarelli perishing when his aircraft crashed into the sea. It was one of seven Bf 109G-6s flying from Bari-Palese, in southern Italy, to Sciacca, Sicily, although the official Italian Air Force list of casualties and missing airmen gives the date of Zarelli's loss as the 18th.

The action intensified on 15 June when large formations of B-17s, B-25s and B-26s, escorted by P-38s, attacked airfields in western Sicily and radio stations in the vicinity of Marsala. Eleven C.202s of 153° *Gruppo* were scrambled from Chinisia to intercept the American aircraft, and their pilots later claimed to have shot down a B-24 and a Boston, plus four B-24s and two Bostons probably destroyed. Among the Italian pilots, Tenente Vittorio Satta of 374ª *Squadriglia* reported firing 370 rounds at what he called a Boston, claiming it as a probable.



An in-flight shot of C.202 374-1, whose markings indicate that it was the personal mount of 374ª *Squadriglia's* CO. From late 1942 through to the autumn of 1943, the unit was equipped with the C.202, and its commanding officers during this period were Capitano Natale Veronesi and then Capitano Mario Mauro (*AM*)



Another view of C.202 374-1, almost certainly taken during the same flight as the previous photograph. When, in 1942, 53° *Stormo* pilots were told that their unit would be re-equipped with these formidable fighters, they received the news with enthusiasm (*AM*)

Fighter pilots of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* converse at Sciacca alongside a Bf 109F-4 of *Gigi Tre Osei*. The two pilots nearest the wingtip are Tenente Angelo Zarelli, who was killed in a flying accident on 12 June 1943, and Sottotenente Antonio Camaioni (in flying helmet), who was one of the *gruppo's* top scoring pilots with four kills and one enemy aircraft damaged, all while flying the Bf 109 (*AM*)

But American return fire had been effective for three *Folgores* of *Asso di Bastoni Gruppo* were severely damaged, although they still managed to return to their base.

A further eight *Folgores* of 151° *Gruppo* were scrambled from Palermo to engage the American formation, and the pilots involved claimed one B-24 as a probable, plus four other 'heavies' and a P-38 damaged. Two C.202s of *Asso di Spade Gruppo* failed to return from this mission, having been shot down by Lightnings of the 14th and 82nd FGs. In fact, P-38s of the 97th FS/82nd FG had been escorting the B-25s, and 1Lt Ray Crawford claimed a C.202 for his sixth, and final, kill of the war. Two other 97th FS pilots, 2Lts Russell C Williams and John A Caputo, made claims for a Bf 109 probable and another damaged. Meanwhile, a dozen P-38s of the 14th FG encountered a lone C.202 over Trapani-Milo airfield, and it was brought down by 1Lt Richard A Campbell of the 37th FS. The group's 48th FS lost two P-38s and their pilots, however, when Capt Donald Anderson and 2Lt Fred Browne were involved in a mid-air collision.

C.202 374-10 of *Asso di Bastoni* 374ª *Squadriglia* is serviced at a Sicilian airfield (*AM*)

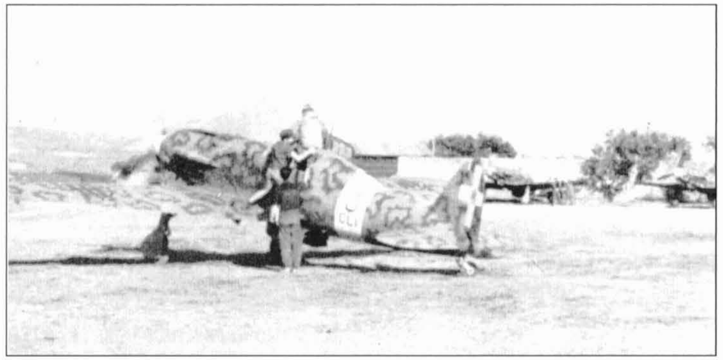
Two *Gigi Tre Osei* fighter pilots are pictured at Sciacca on a bright sunny day in 1943, Tenente Angelo Zarelli (bareheaded) talking to Sottotenente Antonio Camaioni (in flying helmet), who ranked not only among the top scoring 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* pilots, but was also one of Italy's most successful aces in World War 2. He was credited with eight victories in total (*AM via Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)

On the 20th, seven Bf 109s from *Gigi Tre Osei Gruppo* intercepted a formation of B-26s from the 17th BG and A-20s from the 47th BG, escorted by 1st FG Lightnings. The ensuing dogfight saw Sottotenente Antonio Camaioni of 363ª *Squadriglia* claim two P-38s destroyed before damage to his own fighter caused the Italian pilot to break off the action. His comrades, meanwhile, had claimed two more Lightnings destroyed.

Indeed, the day was to be a costly one for the 1st FG. While escorting B-26s targeting Castelvetrano airfield, the 27th and 94th FSs met heavy resistance from defending Bf 109s. Their pilots shot down Lts James W Cronin and Edward O Esser (both from the 94th FS and both captured) together with two 27th FS pilots, Lts Leon Thompson (missing) and Herbert McQuown (wounded). But 1st FG pilots were able to claim eight Bf 109s shot down in two separate combats, although the Italians reported no losses.

The 14th FG was also escorting bombers that day, its charges attacking airfields in western Sicily. Here, 49th FS pilots were intercepted by a mixed force of Bf 109s and Fw 190s. They claimed three kills and two probables for the loss of Capt Richard E Decker's P-38. Damaged by a Bf 109, his aircraft ditched offshore and he was rescued the next day by an RAF Walrus from No 283 Sqn.

24 June saw two C.202 pilots from 151° *Gruppo* claim an enemy twin-engined aircraft shot down while defending an Italian destroyer from attack.

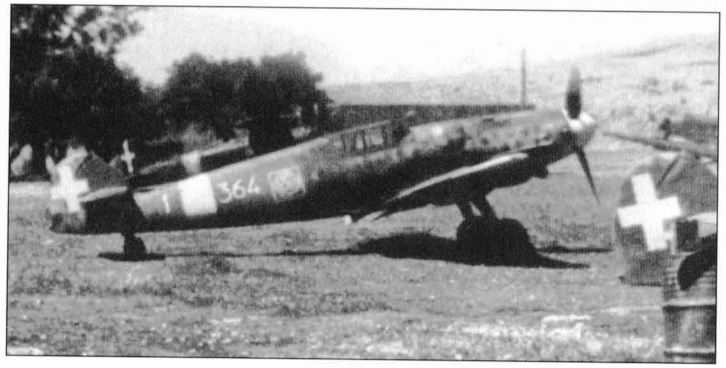


Maggiore Bruno Mondini, 151° *Gruppo* CO, is helped into the cockpit of his C.202 at Palermo airfield after having received the order to scramble during the summer of 1943. Mondini's Macchi displays the Roman numeral CLI on its fuselage, indicating that it is a *gruppo* commander's aircraft (*AM*)

There was another big battle on the 30th when, following early warning by radar, 13 Bf 109s of 150° *Gruppo*, led by the CO, Tenente Colonello Vizzotto, took off from Sciacca at 1130 hrs to intercept another enemy formation. This time the latter was comprised of 36 B-25 Mitchells from the 310th BG that were heading for Sciacca airfield, with 27 P-38s of the 96th FS/82nd FG, led by Capt Raymond H Lynn, as escorts. There was a fierce battle, after which the Italian fighter pilots claimed two bombers and one Lightning as probably destroyed, plus three bombers and four P-38s damaged. Among the Italians to enjoy success were Capitano Mario Bellagambi (364ª *Squadriglia* CO) and Tenente Giosuè Carillo. There are differing accounts of their actual claims, one source crediting Bellagambi with a B-25 as a shared probable, while another states that each man scored a bomber kill.

Capitano Mario Bellagambi, CO of 150° *Gruppo's* 364ª *Squadriglia* (December 1941 to September 1943) adjusts his helmet in his Bf 109 just before take-off. This 14-kill ace was one of the most successful Italian fighter pilots, scoring three victories in 1940-43 and a further 11 with the *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana* in 1944-45 (*AM*)

On the American side, the 82nd FG reported that two of its P-38s had been damaged, and that they had been piloted by Lts Linc Jones and Carl Hendrix. Jones had made it back to his base after an emergency landing near Sahab el Djebel Lake near Cap Bon, while Hendrix had crashed while attempting a landing at Souk el Arba at



Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18391 364-1 flown by Capitano Mario Bellagambi is seen at Sciacca in June 1943. He flew several sorties in this aircraft, claiming success with it against a USAAF B-25 on 30 June 1943 (*AM*)

1300 hrs. In the same combat, pilots of the 96th FS claimed to have shot down three enemy aircraft and damaged another. However, the only loss reported by the Italians was that of Sergente Olindo Soligo, whose Bf 109G ran out of fuel while battling with the P-38s. He later made a belly-landing on the Allied-held airfield at Pantelleria, where he was captured by the Americans.

In early July, after several months of intensive service in the central Mediterranean area, the personnel of 53° *Stormo* left Sicily for Turin-Caselle airfield, leaving 150° *Gruppo* to fight on. 53° *Stormo's* remaining seven C.202s, only three of which were airworthy, were retained at Palermo-Boccadifalco airfield so as to participate in the final defence of western Sicily.

On the 2nd 15 Bf 109s of 150° *Gruppo* were scrambled from Sciacca to intercept a Ninth Air Force formation of B-25s, escorted by P-40s. Pilots of 363ª *Squadriglia* attacked the bombers, while those of 364ª *Squadriglia* tangled with the fighters. Bf 109 pilots from *Gigi Tre Osei* claimed to have downed two fighters, one attributed to Tenente Chiale and the other to Tenente Fornoncini, as well as a B-25 probable, this aircraft having been damaged by Sottotenente Camaioni. The unit also reported attacking eight fighters. Pilots of the escorting P-40s were credited with the destruction of an Fw 190 (downed by 1Lt Charles B Hall of the 99th FS), whilst a second Axis fighter was damaged. Two Warhawks were lost in combat, however.

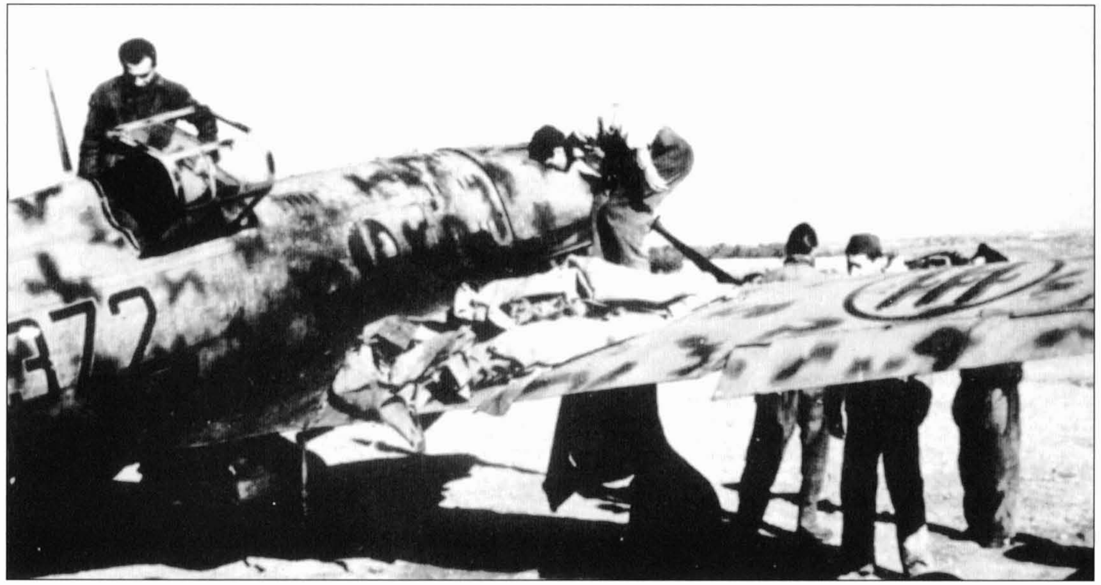
A short while later, the pilots of five 153° *Gruppo* C.202s that had taken off from Chinisia claimed to have hit two Spitfires and a Mitchell. The former were probably from the USAAF's 52nd FG, whose pilots in turn reported shooting down a 'Me 109'.

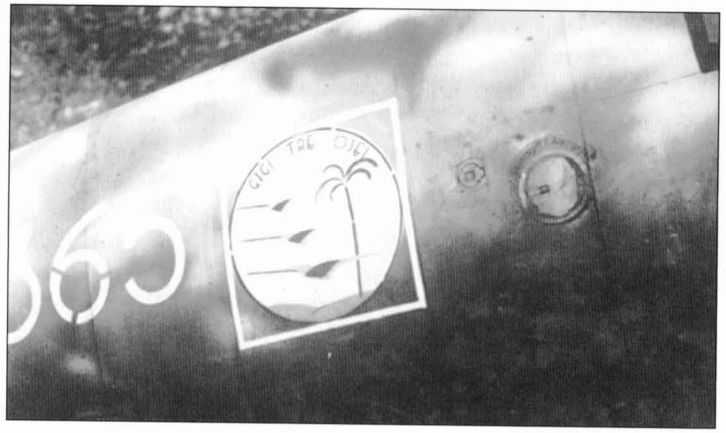
3 July saw 14 Bf 109s from 150° *Gruppo*, led by Tenente Colonello Vizzotto, scrambled from Sciacca at 1035 hrs to intercept a number of large Allied bomber formations, escorted by P-40s from the 33rd and 324th FGs. A-20s of the 47th BG, accompanied by Baltimores of No 3 Wing SAAF, raided the area around Marsala as well as the airfields of Sciacca and Trapani-Milo. In the ensuing air battles four South African Baltimores went down, their loss being attributed to 364ª *Squadriglia* Bf 109Gs. 150° *Gruppo* pilots claimed to have shot down seven P-40s and three bombers, plus another bomber and three Warhawks as probables. Sottotenente Camaioni was credited with two P-40 kills, Tenente Fornoncini one and Capitano Bellagambi two severely damaged. The Americans lost an A-20 and a P-40, although I./JG 77's Bf 109G pilots and the defending flak batteries each claimed two of the Havocs.

On the debit side, two Bf 109Gs were lost, one from I./JG 77 and the other from 364ª *Squadriglia*. The Italian Bf 109 had been piloted by Tenente Giovanni Dell'Innocenti, who was one of the *Gigi Tre Osei* top scorers.

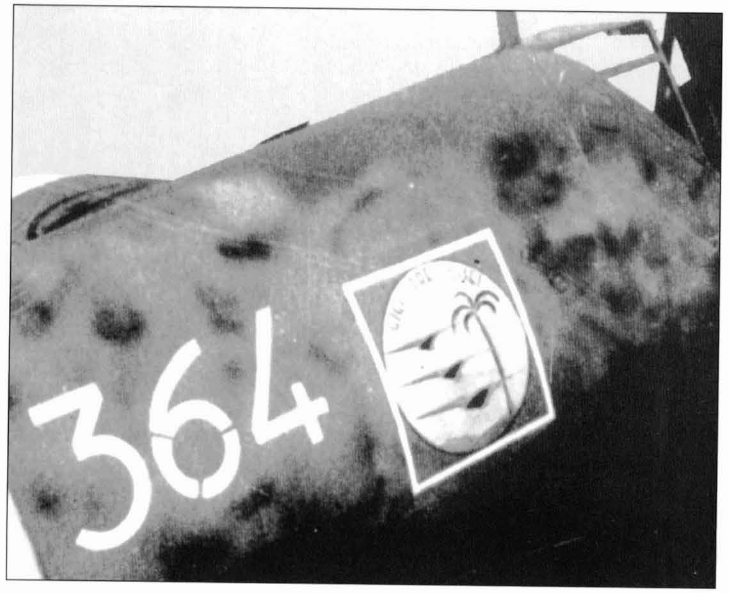
On the 4th 11 Bf 109s of 150° *Gruppo* took off at 1000 hrs, and when they returned an hour later their pilots claimed to have shot down two A-20s and four P-40s south of Cape Passero. During this action Tenente Carillo claimed a P-40 shot down and Capitano Bellagambi damaged two more. In fact, an A-20 of the 47th BG, as

'Ace of Clubs' groundcrew service a C.202 of 372ª *Squadriglia* on a Sicilian airfield (*AM*)





The famous *Gigi Tre Osei* badge is displayed on the fuselage of a Bf 109 of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo's* 365ª *Squadriglia*. This unit was led by Tenente Giuseppe Gianelli from July 1942 until September 1943 (*AM via Maurizio Di Terlizzi*)



Close-up of a Bf 109G of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, clearly displaying the famous *Gigi Tre Osei* unit badge on its fuselage (*AM*)

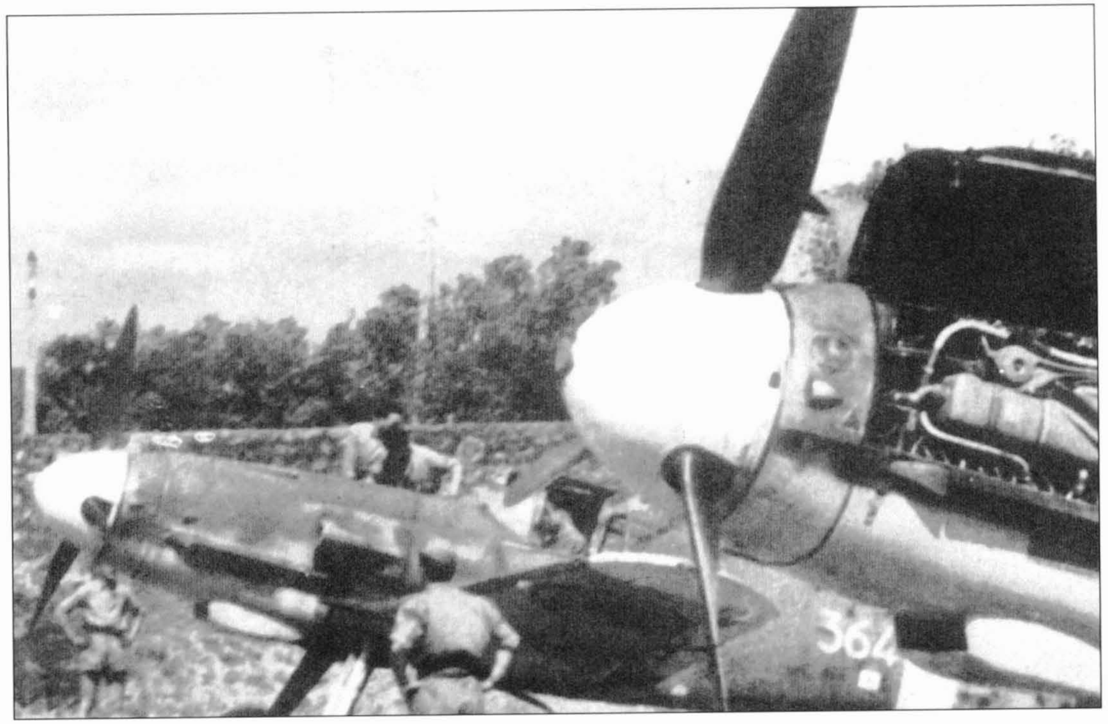
Another shot of 14-kill ace Capitano Bellagambi taken during his service with the ANR in 1944-45, when he led 2ª *Squadriglia* (which was later re-designated 5ª) of 2° *Gruppo Caccia* (*Igino Coggi*)

well as a P-40 of the 324th FG, flown by 2Lt Roy L Huser, had been lost. Later, at 1400 hrs, four Bf 109s intercepted Marauders escorted by 21 Spitfire IXs of Nos 93 and 111 Sqns that were targeting Gerbini. *Gigi Tre Osei* pilots were credited with shooting down two fighters, although only one Spitfire, from No 111 Sqn, was damaged. Plt Off R K Whitney in JK924 was, however, able to return to Malta.

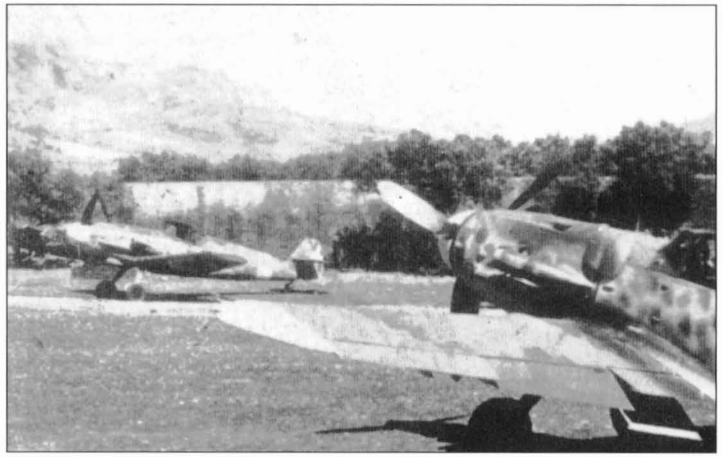
Two days later six Bf 109Gs of 150° *Gruppo* took off from Comiso to intercept bombers attacking San Pietro airfield, where 13 Bf 109s were destroyed on the ground. The Italian pilots claimed to have shot down one bomber, with another as a probable, plus two P-38s and two Spitfires. No P-38s were lost, however, while two RAF Spitfires (from Nos 601 and 145 Sqns) were damaged. They were able to return safely to Malta. No 145 Sqn Spitfire VIII EE790, piloted by Lt H E Wells SAAF, was attacked and hit by five fighters, identified as 'Re.2001s' and Bf 109s. That same day the 324th FG lost a P-40 over Sicily, its pilot, 1Lt Lloyd B Smith Jr, being posted as missing.

A dozen Baltimores, a similar number of 47th BG A-20s and 70 B-25s from the 12th and 340th BGs, escorted by 36 P-40s, dropped 111 tons of bombs on Sciacca, Comiso and Biscari airfields on 8 July. Six Bf 109Gs of *Gigi Tre Osei Gruppo* were scrambled to intercept them, and the Italian pilots claimed to have attacked three P-40s. However, the fighter of Sottotenente Virgilio Pozzoli of 363ª *Squadriglia* was so badly damaged in combat that it hit a wall while attempting to land, killing its pilot.

Among the Warhawks involved in this action were aircraft from the 324th FG, which acknowledged losing two pilots over Sicily. Capt Don B M Wood and 2Lt Warren McHenry were both posted as missing. A third P-40, *Brittle II*, crashed into the sea after its pilot bailed out, while another, 41-19736 of the 316th FS, flown by Lt W S Buchanan, was severely damaged by a C.202. Buchanan barely made it back to his Tunisian base and escaped unhurt, but his P-40 was a total loss.



Groundcrew service the engines of 364ª *Squadriglia* Bf 109Gs at Sciacca in the summer of 1943 (*AM*)

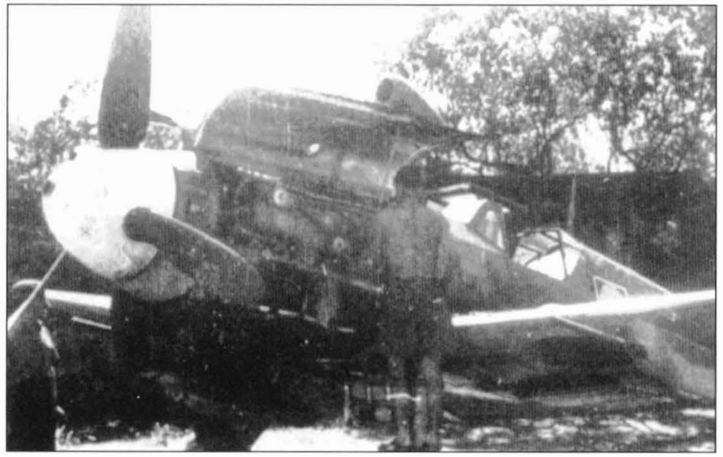


Two *Gigi Tre Osei* Bf 109Gs dispersed at Sciacca airfield, the example in the foreground being a Bf 109G-6 trop (*AM*)

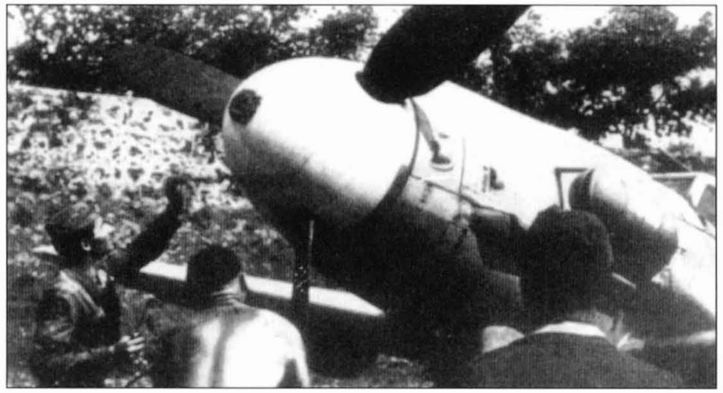
INVASION

Operation *Husky*, the long-awaited invasion of Sicily, began on 9 July. On this date *Gigi Tre Osei* could muster 21 Bf 109Gs at San Pietro di Caltagirone airfield, but only six were airworthy. Two of them, flown by Tenenti Fornoncini and Cavatore, set off to locate and then shadow the approaching invasion fleet. However, on their way home the two Messerschmitts were jumped by Spitfire IXs of No 185 Sqn which shot one of them down into the sea. Tenente Angelo Fornoncini, who was one of the top scorers of 150° *Gruppo*, perished. The other Bf 109 was later belly-landed on Sciacca airfield, Tenente Cavatore being unhurt.

In the late afternoon three Bf 109Gs from 150° *Gruppo* were scrambled, and over Capo San Mauro they battled with five P-40s of the 324th FG. Three of the American fighters were claimed to have been shot down by Maresciallo Walter Bertocci, whose Bf 109 later limped back to base with its right wing badly holed by machine gun fire. Further P-40s were claimed by pilots from JGs 53 and 77, and the Americans admitted that four P-40s had indeed been lost that day.



An engine specialist works on the Daimler-Benz DB 605 fitted to a Bf 109G-4/R6 of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* at Sciacca. Note the underwing cannon pod (*AM*)



150° *Gruppo Autonomo* personnel check a Bf 109G trop under the Sicilian sun at Sciacca in the summer of 1943 (*AM*)

Their pilots were Maj Robert G 'Bob' Dempsey (CO of the 316th FS, who was killed), Capt David E Carpenter (captured) and 1Lts Charles L Chalker (also killed) and Emile Selig Jr (missing). During the combat in which Selig was lost, another Warhawk of the 316th FS/324th FG, flown by 1Lt James T Johnson, was badly damaged after the pilot had shot down a Bf 109. He made it back to base nevertheless.

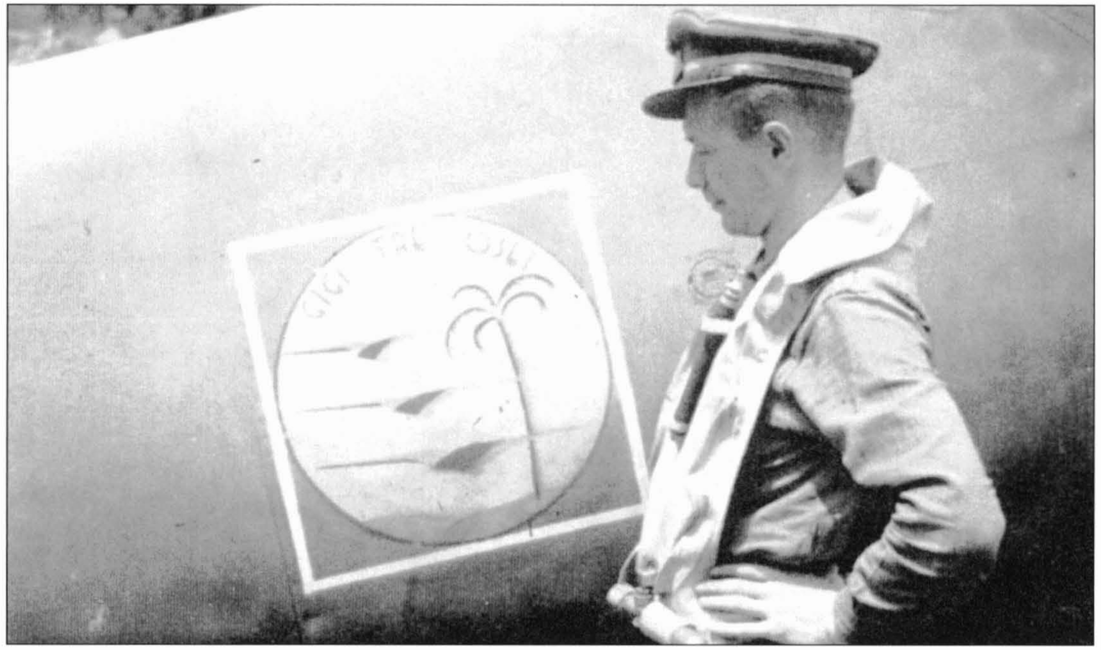
On the 12th 150° *Gruppo* pilots Tenenti Giosuè Carillo and Giovanni Chiale and Capitano Mario Bellagambi flew the last three surviving Bf 109Gs from Sciacca to Palermo. A short while later Tenente Gianelli, Sottotenente Camaioni and another unnamed pilot flew them on to Rome-Ciampino airfield, which they reached on the 15th.

The *stormo* suffered another blow on 22 July when several of its headquarters personnel were lost at sea. Among the missing airmen was the CO, Colonello Ciro Aiello, who became the unit's second commanding officer to be lost during the war.

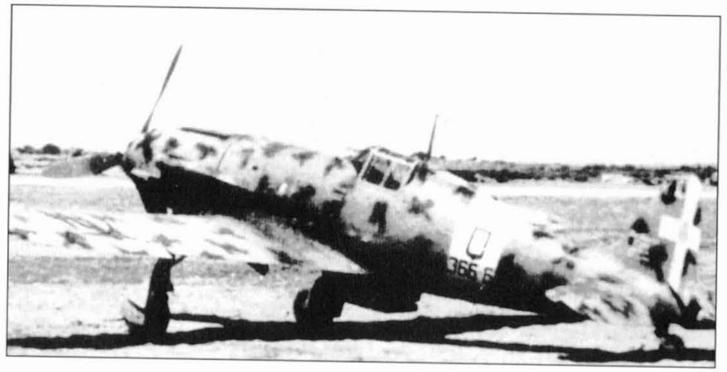
By the 28th, surviving 53° *Stormo* and 150° *Gruppo* personnel had been reunited at Caselle airfield, in Piedmont. There, 151° and 153° *Gruppi* were tasked with air defence duties using their few remaining C.202s. Little action was seen, however, and on 8 September the *stormo* was taken by surprise when the Italian government signed an armistice with the Allies. Several days earlier, the *stormo* had taken delivery of its first Fiat G.55 fighter (MM91063).

Gigi Tre Osei pilots managed to achieve one last kill prior to their unit being disbanded. At the beginning of September, one section of 150° *Gruppo* (led by Tenente Ugo Drago) equipped with four Bf 109s, was based at Rome-Ciampino for air defence duties. At midday on the 8th, 150 B-17s of the 5th BW mounted a raid on the German High Command headquarters at Frascati that saw 389 tons of high explosives dropped on the target. To counter this devastating attack, 25 Axis fighters were scrambled, among them the four *Gigi Tre Osei* Bf 109s. The Messerschmitt flown by Tenente Giovanni Chiale shot down B-17 42-5147 *Old Ironsides* of the 414th BS/97th BG, killing seven of its crew and sending three others into captivity.

As this was the only loss reported by the 5th BW during the raid (attributed by the Americans to flak), this is considered to have been

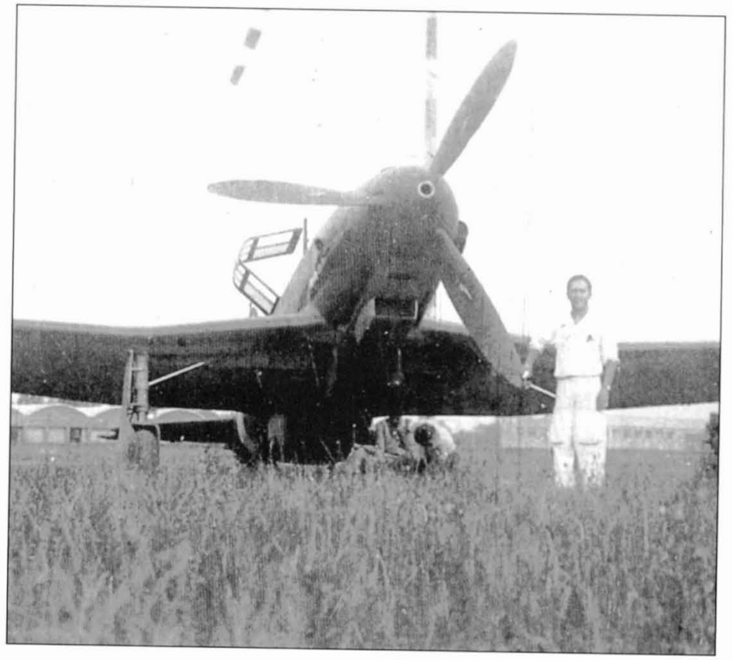


Tenente Giovanni Mancini examines the *Gigi Tre Osei* badge displayed by a Bf 109G from his *gruppo*. Among its top scorers, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* numbered Maresciallo Walter Bertocci, who was credited with shooting down three P-40s of the USAAF's 324th FG on 9 July 1943 (*AM*)



C.202 366-6 of 151° *Gruppo's* 366ª *Squadriglia* awaits its next mission at a Sicilian airfield just prior to the Allied landings (*AM*)

Below
Tenente Ugo Drago led 363ª *Squadriglia* of 150° *Gruppo* between June 1942 and September 1943. During his subsequent service with the ANR he was promoted to capitano in November 1944 and commanded 1ª *Squadriglia* (later renumbered 4ª) of 2° *Gruppo Caccia* (*Igino Coggi*)



Below right
Having been ordered back to Turin-Caselle, the war-weary pilots of 53° *Stormo* began transitioning to the brand-new Fiat G.55 fighter, although only one of these aircraft (MM91063) had been assigned to the unit prior to the shock Italian armistice coming into effect on 8 September 1943 (*AM*)

A striking portrait of Tenente Ugo Drago, commanding officer of 150° *Gruppo's* 363ª *Squadriglia*, seen standing on the wing of his Bf 109G. Drago, here dressed in a German flying suit, claimed two Spitfire kills (his last aerial victories with *Regia Aeronautica*) flying Messerschmitts during June 1943 (*Ugo Drago*)

the last kill achieved by both 150° *Gruppo* and the *Regia Aeronautica* prior to the Italian armistice coming into effect.

So ended the operational life of 53° *Stormo* in World War 2. Through almost 39 months of harsh, bloody aerial warfare, the *stormo's* three main *gruppi*, 150° *Gigi Tre Osei*, 151° *Asso di Spade* and 153° *Asso di Bastoni*, had logged more than 36,000 operational flying hours but lost two *stormo* commanding officers, one *gruppo* commander and eight *squadriglie* COs, as well as 64 pilots. A further 26 were wounded.

In more than 240 aerial battles, the pilots had claimed 350 confirmed victories and another 200 probables. In support of Axis ground forces, 53° *Stormo* pilots flew in all weather conditions, sometimes over the open sea and sometimes in sandstorms that could render engines inoperable. Carrying out in excess of 150 strafing attacks on columns of enemy armour and supply vehicles, often in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire, they also provided close escorts for bomber, reconnaissance and transport aircraft.

Then there were the largely unsung heroes, the groundcrew who were devoted to their unit and who worked tirelessly to maintain their aircraft, despite many technical, logistical and geographical difficulties. And they suffered too, with six of their number killed and several others wounded, all in the cause of keeping 53° *Stormo* flying.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

53° *Stormo* Commanders 1936-43

Rank and Name	Period
Colonello Vincenzo Velardi	15/5 to 16/7/36
Tenente Colonello Giuseppe Borri	16/7/36 to 5/12/37
Colonello Alberto Canaveri	5/12/37 to 14/4/39
Colonello Arrigo Tessari	15/4/39 to 26/10/40
Maggiore Guido Nobili (temporary)	26/10/40 to 25/2/41
Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli	27/1/42 to 3/2/43
Tenente Colonello Bruno Cudugnello (missing in action 1/4/43)	22/2 to 1/4/43
Tenente Colonello Andrea Favini (temporary)	1 to 16/4/43
Colonello Ciro Aiello (missing in action 22/7/43)	17/4 to 22/7/43
Maggiore Natale Veronesi (temporary)	23/7 to 8/9/43

Gruppi and *Squadriglie* Commanders 1936-43

150° *Gruppo Gigi Tre Osei* – 1940-43

Rank and Name	Period
Maggiore Alessandro Bianchedi	May 1936 to January 1937
Capitano Ottorino Fargnoli (temporary)	January 1937 to June 1938
Maggiore Emanuele Valenza	June to August 1938
Maggiore Giannino Meneghini	August 1938 to January 1939
Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli	January 1939 to October 1941
Maggiore (later Tenente Colonello) Antonio Vizzotto	October 1941 to September 1943

363ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Oscar Molinari	May 1936 to August 1937
Sottotenente Franco Nardini (temporary)	August 1937 to March 1938
Capitano Alfonso Isaia	March to July 1938
Tenente Franco Gatti (temporary)	November 1938 to April 1939
Capitano Luigi Mariotti	April 1939 to June 1942
Tenente Ugo Drago	June 1942 to September 1943

364ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Rolando Pratelli	May 1936 to May 1937
Capitano Ottorino Fargnoli	May 1937 to February 1938
Capitano Luigi Filippi	February 1938 to February 1939
Capitano Nicola Magaldi (killed in action 27/11/40)	February 1939 to November 1940
Capitano Luigi Corsini	December 1940 to November 1941
Capitano Mario Bellagambi	December 1941 to September 1943

365ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Giuseppe Mauriello	May 1936 to August 1937
Sottotenente Franco Gatti (temporary)	August 1937 to April 1938
Capitano Edoardo Travaglini	January to July 1941
Tenente Armando Badessi (temporary)	August to September 1941
Capitano Domenico Bevilacqua	September 1941 to July 1942
Tenente Giuseppe Gianelli	July 1942 to September 1943

151° *Gruppo Asso di Spade* – 1940-43

Rank and Name	Period
Maggiore Guido Cecconi	May 1936 to October 1937
Tenente Colonello Achille Lorito	October 1937 to September 1938
Capitano Simeone Marsan (temporary)	September 1938 to May 1939
Maggiore Carlo Calosso	May 1939 to December 1940
Tenente Colonello Raffaello Colacicchi	December 1940 to April 1941
Maggiore Antonio Giachino	April 1941 to September 1942
Capitano Bernardino Serafini	September 1942 to March 1943
Capitano Domenico Bevilacqua (killed in action 10/6/43)	March to June 1943
Capitano Giuseppe Costantini (temporary)	June 1943
Maggiore Bruno Mondini	June to September 1943

366ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Armando Francois	May to December 1936
Sottotenente Adriano Boldetti (temporary)	December 1936 to February 1937
Capitano Andrea Favini	February 1937 to July 1938
Capitano Bernardino Serafini	July 1938 to September 1942
Tenente Piero Veneziani	September 1942 to March 1943
Capitano Enrico Londei (missing in action 31/3/43)	March 1943
Tenente Amedeo Guidi	April to September 1943

367ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	
Capitano Bruno Manzin	May 1936 to April 1937
Tenente Guido Bobba	April to May 1937
Capitano Ferruccio Vosilla	May to October 1937
Sottotenente Natale Veronesi	October 1937 to January 1938
Sottotenente Irzio Bozzolan (temporary)	January to March 1938
Capitano Simeone Marsan	March 1938 to January 1941
Capitano Giuseppe Costantini	January to February 1941
Capitano Simeone Marsan	February to September 1941
Capitano Giuseppe Costantini	October 1941 to July 1942
Tenente Roberto Boschetto	July to August 1942
Capitano Giuseppe Costantini	August 1942 to September 1943

368ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	
Capitano Antonio Vizzotto	May 1936 to September 1937
Tenente Renzo Maggini	September to December 1937
Tenente Giuseppe Aurili	January to March 1938
Capitano Bruno Locatelli	March 1938 to August 1939
Capitano Paolo Maddalena	August to September 1939
Capitano Bruno Locatelli (missing in action 31/1/41)	September 1939 to January 1941
Capitano Giuseppe Zuffi	January 1941 to January 1942
Capitano Mario Ferrero (killed in action 8/6/43)	January 1942 to June 1943
Capitano Fioravante Ruffinato	June to September 1943

XXIII *Gruppo Asso di Bastoni* – 1937-39

Rank and Name	Period
Maggiore Andrea Zotti	April 1937 to July 1938
Maggiore Aldo Remondino	July 1938 to April 1939

18ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Guido Nobili	April to December 1937
Tenente Marco Larcher	December 1937 to June 1938
Tenente Giorgio Frattini	June to July 1938
Capitano Luigi Borgogno	July 1938
Capitano Mario Bonzano	July 1938 to January 1939
Capitano Vezio Mezzetti	January to April 1939
Tenente Armando Farina	April 1939

19ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Enrico Degli Innocenti	April to November 1937
Tenente Ettore Foschini	November 1937 to September 1938
Capitano Giulio Crosara	September 1938 to April 1939

20ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Antonio Larsimont Pergameni	April to December 1937
Capitano Carlo Calosso	February to August 1938
Capitano Andrea Favini	August 1938 to April 1939

153° *Gruppo Asso di Bastoni* – 1939-43

Rank and Name	Period
Maggiore Aldo Remondino	April 1939 to April 1940
Maggiore Alberto Beneforti	May to November 1940
Maggiore Andrea Favini	November 1940 to April 1943
Maggiore Natale Veronesi	April to September 1943

372ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Tenente Armando Farina (killed in action 7/12/41)	July 1939 to December 1941
Capitano Bruno Zavadlal	December 1941 to May 1943
Capitano Eugenio Tarantola	May to September 1943

373ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Giulio Crosara	July 1939 to February 1941
Tenente Cesare Marchesi (temporary)	February to May 1941

Capitano Piero Raimondi (missing in action 21/11/41)	May to November 1941
Capitano Enzo Radini (missing in action 13/10/42)	November 1941 to October 1942
Capitano Cesare Marchesi	October 1942 to September 1943

374ª *Squadriglia*

Rank and Name	Period
Capitano Andrea Favini	July 1939 to April 1940
Capitano Natale Veronesi	April 1940 to February 1943
Capitano Mario Mauro	February to September 1943

APPENDIX 2

Gold Medals awarded to 53° *Stormo* Pilots in World War 2

Greek-Albanian Front 1940-41

Rank, Name and Unit	Notes
Sottotenente Ernesto Trevisi (363ª *Squadriglia*)	killed in action 14/11/40 Koritza
Capitano Nicola Magaldi (364ª *Squadriglia* CO)	killed in action 27/11/40 Tepeleni
Capitano Giorgio Graffer (365ª *Squadriglia* CO)	killed in action 28/11/40 Delvinakion

North African Front, Libya 1941

Rank, Name and Unit	Notes
Capitano Guglielmo Chiarini (366ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*)	killed in action 4/2/41 Barce
Maresciallo Giovanni Accorsi (366ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*)	killed in action 4/2/41 Barce

Italian front 1944-45

Rank, Name and Unit	Notes
Tenente Furio Lauri (368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*)	2 kills plus 1 shared North Africa 1940-41

APPENDIX 3

Aces

Rank and Name	53° *Stormo* Unit(s)	Score	Notes
Tenente (later Capitano) Ugo Drago	CO of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	17 (6 in 1940-43)	11 kills scored in 1944-45 with *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana* (ANR); CO of 1ª (later 4ª) *Squadriglia*/2° *Gruppo* ANR
Capitano (later Maggiore) Mario Bellagambi	CO of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	14 (3 in 1940-43)	Also served with 354ª *Squadriglia* RA; 11 kills scored in 1944-45 with ANR; CO of 2ª (later 5ª) *Squadriglia*/2° *Gruppo* ANR
Tenente Giovanni Dell'Innocenti	364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	12 or 13	KIA 3/7/43; according to some researchers, his score included aircraft that were only damaged.
Tenente Furio Lauri	368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*	11	Lauri claimed 11 kills in 1940-43, not confirmed by official documents. War Diaries of 368ª *Squadriglia* credit him with 2 and 1 shared in North Africa 1940-41
Maggiore Guido Nobili	53° *Stormo* CO, 10/40-2/41	9 (all in Spain)	CO of 157° *Gruppo* CT in 1940
Tenente Angelo Fornoncini	150° *Gruppo*	9	KIA 9/7/43; according to some researchers, his score included aircraft that were only damaged. His flight book records 3 kills, 17 fired on and 2 probables
Sottotenente (later Tenente) Antonio Camaioni	363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	8	Also served with 395ª *Squadriglia* RA and 1ª (later 4ª) *Squadriglia*, 2° *Gruppo* ANR
Tenente Fausto Filippi	364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	8	KIA 23/1/45; also served with 357ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo* RA and 2ª (later 5ª) *Squadriglia*, 2° *Gruppo* ANR
Tenente Raffaele Valenzano	372ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*	8	Also served with 370ª and 78ª *Squadriglie* RA and 1ª (later 4ª) *Squadriglia, 2° Gruppo* ANR
Capitano Tito Valtancoli	373ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*	8	Also served with 86ª *Squadriglia* and was CO of 375ª *Squadriglia* RA
Tenente Mario Mecatti	364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	7	Also CO of 91ª *Squadriglia*, 4° *Stormo*
Maresciallo Guido Fibbia	365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	6 (+3 in Spain)	Also served with 95ª *Squadriglia* RA and 2ª *Squadriglia*, 1° *Gruppo* ANR
Capitano Amedeo Guidi	CO of 366ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*	6	Also CO of 2ª *Squadriglia*, 1° *Gruppo* ANR
Sergente Maggiore Domenico Laiolo	363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	6	Also served with 76ª, 310ª RA and 1ª *Squadriglie*, 1° Gruppo ANR
Capitano Alberto Spigaglia	364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	6	Also served with 6ª *Squadriglia*, 2° Gruppo ANR in 1944-45
Sottotenente Carlo Cucchi	385ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo*	6	Also served with 1ª *Squadriglia*, 1° *Gruppo* ANR
Capitano Guglielmo Chiarini	366ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*	5	KIA 4/2/41; served also with 82ª *Squadriglia*, 2° *Stormo* RA
Sergente Maggiore Domenico Ettore	363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	5	Served also with 78ª and 76ª *Squadriglie* RA and 1ª *Squadriglia*, 1° *Gruppo* ANR
Capitano Giorgio Graffer	CO of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	5	KIA 28/11/40
Maggiore Luigi Mariotti	CO of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*	5	KIA 27/12/44; later CO of 9° *Gruppo* and 4° *Stormo*
Maggiore (later Ten Col) Antonio Vizzotto	150° *Gruppo* CO 10/41-9/43	5	Absence of official primary documents confirming his score, which nevertheless could be correct
Sergente Maggiore Spiridione Guiducci	357ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo*	5	Also served with 353ª *Squadriglia*, 20° Gruppo RA

COLOUR PLATES

1

CR.32 of 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Mirafiori, Italy, summer 1936
The nimble Fiat CR.32 fighter was the first type to be operated by 53° *Stormo* following its establishment in May 1936. This example has an overall silver (*alluminio*) finish on its wings, fuselage, upper- and undersurfaces. It displays a black-outlined roundel with standard fuselage *fasces* on a blue background just ahead of the cockpit. Black unit and individual codes have been applied ahead of the tail unit and under the headrest fairing. The three-colour (green-white-red) Italian national flag appears on the rudder, with the crest of Savoy on the upper white stripe of the tri-colour flag.

2

CR.42 of Capitano Giorgio Graffer, CO of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, summer 1940
Between late 1939 and early 1940, 53° *Stormo* re-equipped with the Fiat CR.42, later named *Falco*, in time for Italy's entry into World War 2 in June 1940. This aircraft was the personal mount of Capitano Giorgio Graffer, CO of 365ª *Squadriglia* and a five-kill ace who was shot down and killed in combat with RAF Gladiators of No 80 Sqn over Delvinakion, Albania, on 28 November 1940. It was while flying this aircraft that Graffer rammed a Whitley V bomber of No 10 Sqn over Turin on the night of 13/14 August 1940, causing it to crash.

3

C.200 MM5089 of 372ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Brindisi, Italy, November 1940
On 3 November 1940 372ª *Squadriglia* was transferred to Brindisi airfield in Apulia, southern Italy, so as to reinforce the region's air defences. The unit also participated in the campaign in Greece, where it was joined by the remaining two 153° *Gruppo squadriglie* during the last ten days of November. All three 153° *Gruppo* units later participated in the Yugoslavian campaign. This C.200 was an early-build machine supplied by Macchi with an enclosed canopy.

4

C.200 of Sottotenente Luigi 'Gino' Del Bufalo, 386ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy November 1940
157° *Gruppo* operated with 1° *Stormo CT* from 10 June until 25 July 1940, when it became an autonomous unit. On 9 September 1940 it was transferred to Caselle airfield in Piedmont where, on the 11th, it joined 53° *Stormo*. On 22 October the *gruppo* was re-equipped with the new C.200 monoplane fighter. The *gruppo* motto *Sotto a chi tocca*! ('Forward the next!') was devised by 'Gino' Del Bufalo himself. The badge, which features a black armour-clad arm swinging a red spiked mace, was officially adopted in the autumn of 1940 on the initiative of *gruppo* CO, Maggiore Guido Nobili. Again, this is an early-build example of the C.200.

5

C.200 of Tenente Cesare Marchesi, CO of 373ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Bari-Palese, Italy, April 1941
Operating from Apulia, the unit, commanded by Tenente Marchesi, participated in the Balkan campaign between November 1940 and April 1941, when it flew bomber escort missions and sweeps over Greece and Yugoslavia as well as patrols over the Straits of Otranto. This aircraft displays a camouflage scheme featuring the standard chrome yellow band on the engine cowling – a form of tactical marking worn by all Italian fighters, except those operating on the Eastern front, until October 1941.

6

C.200 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Grottaglie, Italy, April 1941
After the Yugoslavian campaign 153° *Gruppo* was briefly based in Apulia to fly air defence missions over Taranto harbour until late May 1941. It was then re-deployed to North Africa in June-July. Favini's aircraft has been painted in a three-tone camouflage scheme with sand (*giallo mimetico 4*) and brown (*bruno mimetico*) 'poached egg' blotches on a dark green (*verde mimetico 2*) background and light grey (*grigio mimetico*) undersides. The engine cowling is chrome yellow (*giallo cromo*) and there is a black unit code below the cockpit and a red individual aircraft numeral applied over the white fuselage band. The 153° *Gruppo* 'Ace of Clubs' badge has been applied with the shaft of the club facing to the right. The fuselage *fasces* are displayed inside the black-outlined blue roundel alongside the *gruppo* CO's red-striped, white-outlined blue command pennant below the windscreen. The white cross of Savoy appears on the rudder, with the Savoy crest in the centre. The national roundel on the wing undersides is black with white-edging and white *fasces*. This was applied in reverse on the wing uppersurfaces.

7

C.200 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Grottaglie, Italy, April 1941
An example of a first series C.200, this aircraft had originally been built with a sliding canopy enclosing its cockpit, but this was later modified with a semi-enclosed one. Italian fighter pilots disliked enclosed cockpits and, accordingly, most C.200s built by Macchi were delivered with open cockpits. This aircraft features a three-tone camouflage scheme with mixed mottling in sand (*giallo mimetico 4*) and brown (*bruno mimetico*) over a dark green (*verde mimetico 2*) background and light grey (*grigio mimetico*) undersides, plus a standard chrome yellow cowling band.

8

C.200 of 372ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, the Balkans, April 1941
153° *Gruppo's* 372ª *Squadriglia* was posted to the Apulian airfield of Brindisi on 3 November 1940 to defend the port against British attacks, flying its first patrol the following day. The unit remained there throughout the winter of 1940-41 until it was posted away the following spring. The *squadriglia* also operated over the Balkans. This aircraft displays a white cowling band and a mixed mottling of sharp-edged brown and large sand-coloured blotches over a dark green background.

9

C.200 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, winter 1941-42
This was another of the aircraft flown by Maggiore Favini and used by him when the *Asso di Bastoni Gruppo* returned to Italy after its long North African tour. It joined 151° *Gruppo* in the reactivation of 53° *Stormo* on 1 January 1942. The unit was committed to North Africa until late December 1941, having moved between April and July. On its repatriation the *gruppo* handed over its last airworthy C.200s to 8° and 150° *Gruppi*.

10

C.200 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, North Africa, summer 1941
The sand filter on the engine intake and additional small oil radiator indicate that this Macchi was used in North Africa. On 19 April 1941 374ª *Squadriglia* was the first 153° *Gruppo* unit to be being deployed to Libya, where it was subsequently joined on 15 July 1941 by the other two *squadriglie*, 373ª and 374ª. The *gruppo* then began a long and arduous operational tour that lasted until late December. The uppersurfaces of this aircraft have been painted in the 'colonial' scheme of light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*) with sparse elongated snake-like mottles of dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) over light blue-grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) undersides.

11

G.50bis of Maggiore Antonio Giachino, CO of 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, March 1942
On April 1941 Maggiore Antonio Giachino took over command of 151° *Gruppo* from Tenente Colonello Raffaello Colacicchi and led the unit during operations in North Africa and Greece until September 1942. This *Freccia* (Arrow) fighter features a two-tone camouflage scheme consisting of large sand (*giallo mimetico 4*) dapples on a dark green (*verde mimetico 2*) background, with light grey (*grigio mimetico*) undersides. A blue roundel outlined in black with *fasces* adorns the fuselage beneath the cockpit, with a white Roman numeral unit code ahead of the white fuselage band. The *gruppo* badge has been applied inside the white fuselage band. Black national insignia *fasces* over a clear background have been applied inside black-trimmed roundels on both the uppersurfaces and undersides of the wings. The House of Savoy crest has been added to the upper vertical arm of the Savoy cross on the tail, rather than in the central position as usual.

12

C.200 of 373ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, North Africa, summer 1941
On 15 July 1941, 372ª and 373ª *Squadriglie* joined 374ª *Squadriglia* in Libya, enabling all 153° *Gruppo* units to operate against Allied forces. This aircraft features a tropical camouflage scheme with small dark green (*verde mimetico 2*) patches applied over a sand (*giallo mimetico 4*) background and light grey (*grigio mimetico*) undersurfaces. The cowling has been painted in chrome yellow. Ahead of the windscreen is a blue roundel outlined in black containing the *fasces* insignia. The black unit code has been applied ahead of the fuselage band, with a red individual numeral superimposed upon it and the blue-bordered 'Ace of Clubs' *Gruppo* emblem displayed aft of the fuselage band. The white cross of Savoy with the Savoy crest state emblem appears on the rudder. National insignia roundels have been applied in black on a clear background to both sides of the wings.

13

C.200 of 385ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, 1941
After leaving the North African front 157° *Gruppo* was based at Caselle airfield in Piedmont from December 1941 for training. This Macchi features a white-painted engine cowling and propeller spinner, and the white fuselage band contains the octagonal *gruppo* emblem that consists of a black armoured fist and the legend *Sotto a chi tocca!*

14

C.200 of Generale di Brigata Aerea Ferdinando Raffaelli, AOC 5ª *Squadra Aerea* Eastern Sector, 373ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Derna, Libya, November 1941
As a high ranking officer, Raffaelli was entitled to 'borrow' a C.200 to use as his personal aircraft, and for making quick inspection trips to frontline sectors. Worthy of note is that this Macchi displays the appropriate command pennant, featuring a red star on a blue base, beneath the cockpit and the black unit code forward of the fuselage band. The red individual number code is superimposed on the white fuselage band and blue-bordered 'Ace of Clubs' emblem (shaft facing right) appears aft of the fuselage band. The white tail cross is in its customary position on the rudder, while the national insignia roundels are in black over a clear background on both sides of the wing.

15

C.200 of Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli, CO of 150° *Gruppo*, Tirana, Albania, May 1941
Tenente Colonello Rolando Pratelli was 150° *Gruppo* CO from January 1939 until October 1941, during which time he led the unit through the French campaign and on the Greek-Albanian and Balkan fronts. This aircraft is depicted as it appeared on Tirana airfield, Albania on 7 May 1941 during the visit of King Victor Emmanuel III. The markings are of particular interest because the white fuselage band displays the 150° *Gruppo* unit emblem in use before the adoption of the *Gigi Tre Osei* badge. The *gruppo* code in Roman numerals (CL equals 150) appears on the fuselage, together with the red-striped blue *gruppo* commander's pennant.

16

C.200 of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, En Nofilia, Libya, January 1942
Having received autonomous status on 23 October 1940 shortly before its deployment in Albania, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* began operations in Libya in early 1942. This aircraft has a tropical two-tone camouflage scheme with small dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) blotches on a light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*) background, plus light blue grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) undersides. A black-outlined blue roundel with *fasces* appears forward of the windscreen and there is a stylised white unit code, distinctive to this *squadriglia*, beneath the headrest and a red individual aircraft numeral aft of the white fuselage band. The white tail cross with the Savoy crest and

national insignia roundels have been painted in black over a clear background above and below the wings.

17

C.200 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Martuba, Libya, April 1942

This fighter displays the famous *Gigi Tre Osei* unit badge adopted by 150° *Gruppo* aircraft during the North African campaign. Sottotenente Maurizio Nicolis di Robilant, a close friend of Sottotenente Luigi 'Gigi' Caneppele, devised the emblem and had it applied to his own aircraft to honour his comrade. Caneppele, a pre-war Olympic glider pilot, had been killed in a flying accident on 1 February 1942. Di Robilant was himself shot down and killed just two weeks later, his Macchi being one of several C.200s downed near Acroma by anti-aircraft fire and Kittyhawks of No 112 Sqn and No 3 Sqn RAAF.

18

C.200 of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, North Africa, spring 1942

This aircraft has been painted in a tropical two-tone camouflage scheme consisting of dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) blotches applied over a background of light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*), with light blue-grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) undersides. It displays a white unit code and red individual aircraft numeral ahead and behind the white fuselage band. The *gruppo* emblem has been superimposed on the fuselage band, while the white tail cross (without the Savoy crest) has been applied to the rudder, its shorter forward arm over the fin. Finally, the national insignia roundels are painted in black over a clear background, both above and below the wings.

19

C.200 MM6805 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, June 1942

Maggiore Favini commanded 153° *Gruppo* from November 1940 through to April 1943. Whilst a capitano, he had previously commanded 20ª *Squadriglia* of XXIII *Gruppo* in Spain (August 1938 to April 1939) and 374ª *Squadriglia* in Italy (July 1939 to April 1940). The white-outlined, red-striped *gruppo* commander's pennant appears beneath the windscreen, while the unit code in white-outlined black Roman numerals and blue-bordered unit badge are displayed ahead and behind the white fuselage band. The white tail cross with the Savoy crest has been applied to the rudder. The national insignia roundels are painted in black over a clear background, both above and below the wings.

20

C.200 MM6810 of Capitano Natale Veronesi, CO of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Turin-Caselle, Italy, 1942

Capitano Natale Veronesi led 374ª *Squadriglia* from April 1940 to February 1943. Later, as a maggiore, he took over command of 153° *Gruppo* from Maggiore Favini. Indeed, he was the *gruppo*'s final commanding officer, occupying this position between April and September 1943. This aircraft's fuselage and wings have been painted in dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) overall, with light blue grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) undersides. It displays a white-outlined black unit code and red individual aircraft numeral ahead of and over the white fuselage band. The blue-bordered 'Ace of Clubs' unit emblem is displayed aft of the fuselage band. The red-striped blue *squadriglia* CO's pennant has been applied beneath the windscreen and behind the fuselage Fascist *fasces* insignia. The white tail cross on the rudder has the Savoy crest in the centre. The national insignia roundels, painted in black over a clear background, appear on both the wing upper- and undersurfaces.

21

C.200 MM7688 of Sergente Zani, 384ª *Squadriglia*, 157° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Castelvetrano, Sicily, May 1943

Sergente Zani was among the 157° *Gruppo* pilots who participated in the Tunisian and Sicilian campaigns between March and August 1943 following a lengthy operational tour in the Aegean from 5 April 1942. During its time in Greece, when the unit was comprised of 384ª and 385ª *Squadriglie*, 157° *Gruppo* was based at Athens for day and night operations. Its aircraft also escorted Axis naval convoys in Greek waters – between April and July 1942, 157° *Gruppo* and its C.200s logged a high number of flying hours performing these missions. From 1 December 1942 384ª and 357ª *Squadriglie* were re-deployed to Sicily, where they were joined by 358ª *Squadriglia* to bring the *gruppo* up to strength.

22

C.202 of Capitano Mario Ferrero, CO of 368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Tunisia, early 1943

Capitano Ferrero commanded 368ª *Squadriglia* between January and June 1943, during which time the unit escorted transport aircraft on their way to Tunisia. Ferrero failed to return from an engagement with American aircraft near Pantelleria on 8 June 1943 and was succeeded by Capitano Fioravante Ruffinato. Ferrero's aircraft displays a two-tone 'colonial' camouflage scheme with a dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) mottling over a light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*) background, light blue grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) undersides and white-painted spinner. The markings include black unit and red individual codes, together with the blue-outlined *gruppo* badge, all within the white fuselage band. The black-outlined roundel with standard fuselage *fasces* on a blue background has been applied forward of the cockpit. The national insignia roundels in black over a clear background appear on the wing upper- and undersurfaces and the white cross on the rudder has the Savoy crest state emblem in the centre.

23

C.202 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, K3 Benghazi, Libya, July 1942

368ª *Squadriglia* received its first examples of the C.202 in mid-May 1942. In July a section equipped with these fighters was deployed to K3 airfield, where between 1 July and 8 November 1942 the *Folgores* carried out shipping escort missions and assisted in the defence of Benghazi's harbour and airfields. This aircraft features a two-tone colonial camouflage scheme with a sparse mottling in dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) over a light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*) background. The undersides are in light blue-grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) and the spinner has been painted white. The black individual and white unit numerals are displayed across the white fuselage band, inside which appears the *Gigi Tre Osei* badge. Note the small red-outlined roundel with a red cross indicating the location of the first aid kit.

24

C.202 of Maggiore Andrea Favini, CO of 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sicily, late 1942

On 11 September 1942 153° *Gruppo* was re-deployed to Sicily to take part in the third and final Axis air offensive against Malta, which ended in late October. Favini's Macchi displays a blue-bordered 'Ace of Clubs' *Gruppo* badge and a blue, white-outlined Roman numeral to indicate that this is the *gruppo* CO's mount. Both markings have been applied ahead of and behind the white fuselage band, which has been bisected by a long vertical blue strip. These three features have been traditionally depicted in red, but colour photographs from the period clearly show the *gruppo* badge bordered in blue, suggesting that the vertical strip over the fuselage band was applied in the same colour.

25

C.202 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sicily, autumn 1942

Together with other 153° *Gruppo* C.202s, this aircraft participated in the final offensive against Malta in October 1942, where it duelled with RAF Spitfire Vs. Despite their courage, the unit's pilots were only able to claim three Spitfires destroyed and seven more as probables in 14 aerial combats over the besieged island. On 13 October Capitano Enzo Radini, CO of 373ª *Squadriglia*, failed to return from an encounter with No 249 Sqn Spitfires, as did Tenente Felice Mezzetti.

26

C.202 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, K3 Benghazi, Libya, summer 1942

This *Gigi Tre Osei* C.202 was based at Benghazi's K3 airfield for escort missions and to defend the harbour. In July 1942 *Folgores* of 150° *Gruppo* carried out several interceptions of USAAF B-24Ds from the Halverson Detachment and RAF Liberator II bombers that were raiding the port. Three bombers were claimed as shot down with two probables. This Macchi displays a two-tone colonial camouflage scheme featuring sparse dappling in dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) over a light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*) background. The undersides have been painted light blue-grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) and the spinner is white. The black unit and individual numerals have been applied across the white fuselage band in which the monochrome *Gigi Tre Osei* unit badge also appears.

27

C.202 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Palermo-Boccadifalco, Sicily, July 1943

One section of 153° *Gruppo* C.202s operated from Palermo-Boccadifalco airfield between 9 and 16 July 1943 to reinforce the island's defences against the Allied invasion. During this period 374ª *Squadriglia* was led by Capitano Mario Mauro, who remained in command until the Italian surrender in September. This *Folgore* also boasts a two-tone colonial camouflage scheme with swirling mottles of dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) over a light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*) background. The forward cowling, probably from another aircraft, has dark olive green 'smoke rings' over a light hazelnut brown base. The undersides are light blue-grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*) and the spinner is white. A white-outlined black unit code appears ahead of the white fuselage band, which displays the red individual numeral. The *Gruppo* badge outlined in white with the shaft of the club facing right appears aft of the fuselage band. The national insignia roundels have been painted in black over a clear background on both wing surfaces, while the white tail cross (its forward arm on the fin) has the Savoy crest at its centre.

28

C.202 of 374ª *Squadriglia*, 153° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Palermo-Boccadifalco, Sicily, summer 1943

In 1942 153° *Gruppo* began replacing its C.200s with C.202s, and in September of that year the unit was transferred to Sicily for the Malta offensive. Its aircraft retained the same markings into the spring and summer of 1943, when the *gruppo* became embroiled in the ill-fated defence of Sicily. This aircraft has the two-tone colonial camouflage scheme on its uppersurfaces and spinner, with a dark olive green (*verde oliva scuro 2*) 'smoke ring' mottling over a light hazelnut brown (*nocciola chiaro 4*) background. The undersides are light blue-grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*). The black unit and individual codes appear within the white fuselage band, with the 'Ace of Clubs' *Gruppo* emblem aft of it. The rudder displays the usual white cross and Savoy crest.

29

G.50bis of 368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sfax, Tunisia, early 1943

On 1 January 1942 151° *Gruppo* received its first G.50bis fighters, after which it re-joined 53° *Stormo* for transfer to Greece and patrol duties. In early 1943 368ª *Squadriglia* was moved to Sfax, in Tunisia, to conduct ground attack missions. The G.50bis of Tenente Furio Lauri was shot down by American anti-aircraft fire during one such sortie near Sidi bou Zid on 22 January.

30

G.50bis MM5236 of 368ª *Squadriglia*, 151° *Gruppo*, 53° *Stormo*, Sfax, Tunisia, early 1943

During its operational tour in Tunisia the *gruppo's* G.50bis aircraft flew numerous ground attack sorties in cooperation with the Luftwaffe, although these missions were often hindered by poor coordination between the Axis partners. Three attack missions were flown by the unit on 10 and 11 January 1943 when Allied vehicles were targeted. By early March, when 368ª *Squadriglia* was withdrawn to Pantelleria, only seven G.50s remained from the unit's original strength.

31

Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18391 of Capitano Mario Bellagambi, CO of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943

Capitano Bellagambi was one of Italy's most successful fighter pilots, achieving a total of 14 victories during World War 2 – three while serving with the *Regia Aeronautica*

(RA) through to September 1943 and 11 with the *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana* (ANR) during 1944–45. This aircraft was Bellagambi's favourite, and he used it to down a USAAF bomber on 30 June 1943. Severely damaged and no longer airworthy, it was found by the Allies the following month abandoned on the Sicilian airstrip of Sciacca. The fighter is painted in standard Luftwaffe colours of RLM 74/75/76, with white-painted wingtip undersides and spinner. It displays the *Gigi Tre Osei Gruppo* badge inside a white-outlined square, and the white tail cross without the Savoy crest appears on the rudder.

32

Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18421 of Tenente Ugo Drago, CO of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, summer 1943

'White 7' was the usual mount of Tenente Drago, 363ª *Squadriglia* CO and another of Italy's most successful fighter pilots. He considered the number '7' to be lucky and had most of his aircraft coded accordingly, rather than with the number '1' which was usually displayed by unit leaders. Drago ended the war with the rank of capitano, being credited with 17 kills, six of which had been achieved with the RA and 11 with the ANR. It was while flying 'White 7' on 9 June 1943 that Drago claimed two kills. He was, however, shot down later that day in this machine by USAAF Spitfires of the 31st FG, although he was able to bail out. His replacement 'White 7' was discovered by the Allies in July after it had belly-landed at Sciacca.

33

Bf 109F-4 of 363ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943

'White 2', assigned to 150° *Gruppo's* 363ª *Squadriglia* (commanded by Tenente Ugo Drago), displays the *Gigi Tre Osei Gruppo* badge inside a white-outlined square, with white unit and individual codes applied over the large white fuselage band. The white Savoy cross on the tail and Savoy crest emblem appear on the rudder, with the forward arm of the cross on the fin.

34

Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 16594 of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943

Delivered to 150° *Gruppo* on 20 April 1943 minus its underwing 20 mm cannon pods, 'White 2' was reportedly in service with 364ª *Squadriglia* (commanded by Capitano Mario Bellagambi) from 23 May through to 1 July 1943. This aircraft has received the standard Luftwaffe RLM 74/75/76 finish and displays the unit badge inside a white square aft of the cockpit. The national insignia roundels with the *fasces* have been applied to the underwing surfaces only. The Allies discovered its burnt-out remains at Sciacca airfield in July 1943.

35

Bf 109G-6/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 18367 of Tenente Giosuè Carillo, 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943

'White 15' was flown during the early summer of 1943 by Tenente Giosuè Carillo, who, on 12 July 1943 accompanied by Capitano Mario Bellagambi and Tenente Giovanni Chiale, flew the last three surviving 150° *Gruppo* Bf 109s from Sciacca to Palermo. Wk-Nr. 18367 was delivered to 365ª *Squadriglia* on 16 June, and in July the fighter was captured in good condition by the Allies at Sciacca. Its paint finish features the standard Luftwaffe RLM 74/75/76 scheme with the previous German markings painted out in light blue-grey (*grigio azzurro chiaro 1*). 'White 15' displays the coloured *Gigi Tre Osei Gruppo* emblem behind the cockpit and national insignia roundels in black over a clear background, both above and below the wings.

36

Bf 109G-6/R6 trop of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943

The third sub-unit of 150° *Gruppo* was 365ª *Squadriglia*, which was commanded in 1943 by Tenente Giuseppe Gianelli. This particular aircraft served with the unit, and it was among those captured by the Allies at Sciacca airfield. 'White 14' was camouflaged in the standard Luftwaffe scheme of RLM 74/75/76, and it featured a black-painted spinner and white tail cross lacking the Savoy crest emblem. National insignia roundels have been painted in black over a clear background, both above and below the wings.

37

Bf 109G-4/R6 Wk-Nr. 19566 of Tenente Giuseppe Gianelli, CO of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943

The individual number of 'White 1' clearly identifies this aircraft as the personal mount of Tenente Giuseppe Gianelli, 365ª *Squadriglia* CO from July 1942 to September 1943. The standard Luftwaffe RLM 74/75/76 finish has been applied and the monochrome version of the unit badge inside a white-outlined square is displayed aft of the cockpit. Wk-Nr. 19566 was flown by 365ª *Squadriglia* between 23 May and 1 July 1943, and it was later found by the Allies with a damaged tail at Sciacca.

38

Bf 109G-4/R6 Wk-Nr. 19426 of 364ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, June 1943

Another fighter operated by Capitano Bellagambi's 364ª *Squadriglia*, 'White 5' was delivered to 150° *Gruppo* on 20 April 1943. Reported to be in service on 23 May 1943, it was badly damaged in an accident before 1 July – the month in which it was found by the Allies in good condition at Sciacca. The aircraft displays an unusual white-painted *Gigi Tre Osei* badge behind the cockpit. Note the unit numeral and small red cross indicating the position of the first aid kit.

39

Bf 109G-2/R6 trop Wk-Nr. 10825 of 365ª *Squadriglia*, 150° *Gruppo Autonomo*, Sciacca, Sicily, July 1943

Used for training pilots in Tenente Gianelli's 365ª *Squadriglia*, 'White 8' displays an unusual and perhaps unique paint scheme for an Italian-operated Bf 109. This consists of Luftwaffe RLM 79 on the uppersurfaces of the fuselage and fin over RLM 78. This aircraft lacks both a unit badge and national insignia roundels above and below the wings. The Allies found it in good condition at Sciacca on July 1943.

COLOUR SECTION

1

A rare colour photograph of a C.200 of 157° *Gruppo's* 357ª *Squadriglia* taken among other fighter and transport aircraft on a *Regia Aeronautica* airfield in 1943 (*AM*)

2

'Ace of Clubs' fighter pilots pose with their mascot and C.202 374-10 (*AM*)

3

This colour photograph, taken by USAAF personnel at Sciacca airfield in July 1943, shows Bf 109G-6/R6 trop 'White 14' of 150° *Gruppo's* 365ª *Squadriglia*. This unit was led by Tenente Giuseppe Gianelli. 'White 14' was one of a number of *Gigi Tre Osei* Bf 109s captured by the advancing US forces *(via Author)*

4

Six fighter pilots of 150° *Gruppo Autonomo* pose beside a *Gigi Tre Osei* Bf 109F-4 at Sciacca in the late spring of 1943. They are (from left to right), unknown, Tenente Giovanni Mancini, Tenente Angelo Zarelli, Sottotenente Antonio Camaioni, Sergente Giorgio Leone and Tenente Giosuè Carillo *(AM via Maurizio Di Terlizzi)*

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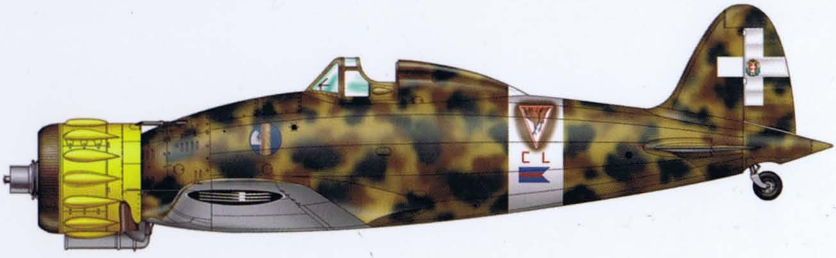

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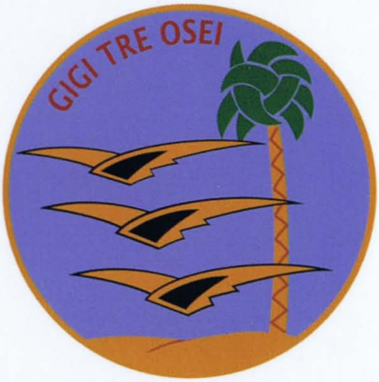

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